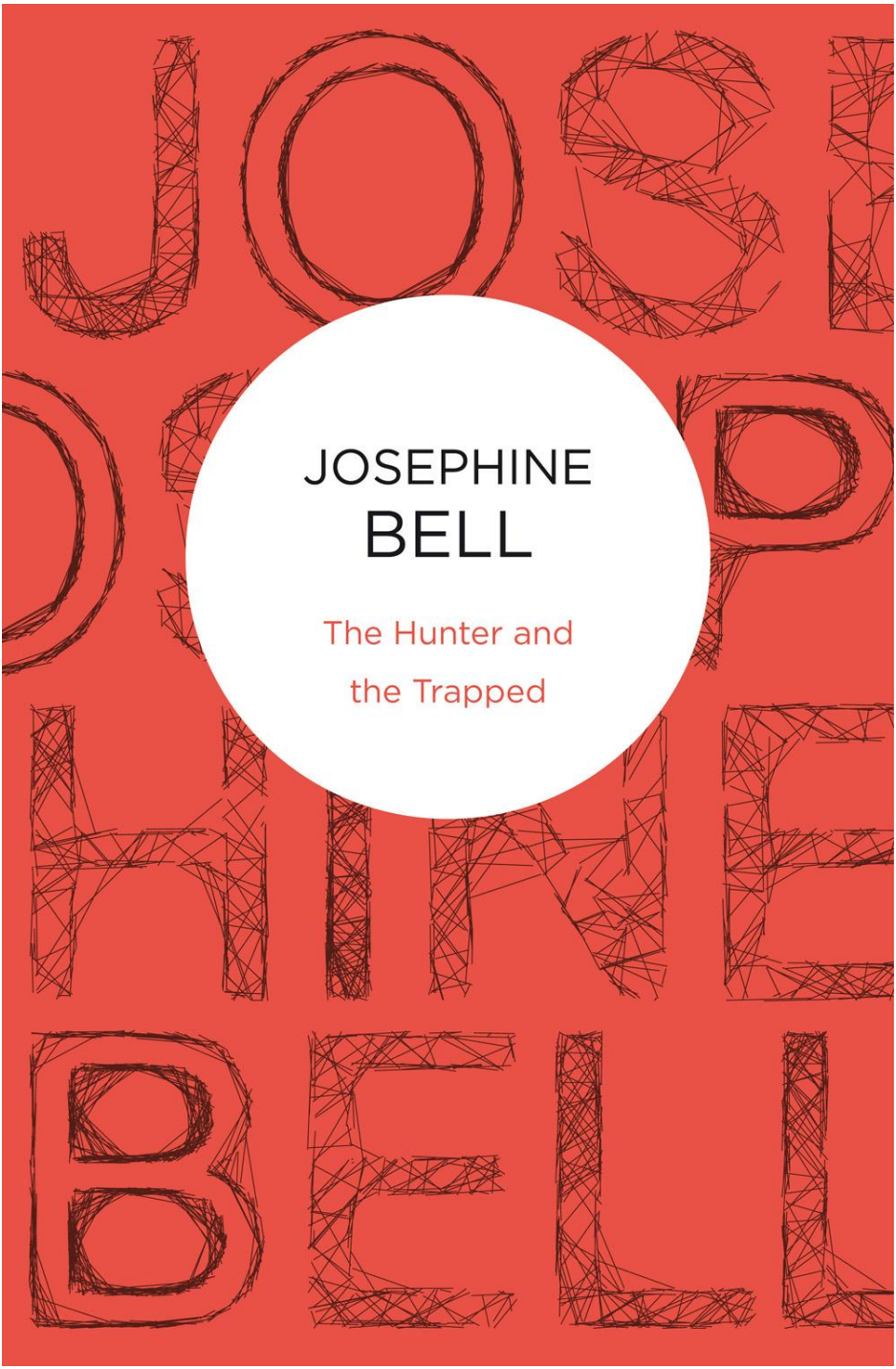
JOSEPHINE
BELL
The Hunter and
the Trapped

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Josephine Bell

The Hunter and the Trapped

Josephine Bell

Josephine Bell was born Doris Bell Collier in Manchester, England. Between 1910 and 1916 she studied at Godolphin School, then trained at Newnham College, Cambridge until 1919. At the University College Hospital in London she was granted M.R.C.S. and L.R.C.P. in 1922, and a M.B. B.S. in 1924.

Bell was a prolific author, writing forty-three novels and numerous uncollected short stories during a forty-five year period.

Many of her short stories appeared in the *London Evening Standard*. Using her pen name she wrote numerous detective novels beginning in 1936, and she was well-known for her medical mysteries. Her early books featured the fictional character Dr. David Wintringham who worked at Research Hospital in London as a junior assistant physician. She helped found the Crime Writers' Association in 1953 and served as chair during 1959–60.

PART ONE

A Trap is Set

Chapter One

The forecourt of the college was filled with students, some moving purposefully towards a door at the side of the quadrangle, others loitering to enjoy the spring sunshine, finding in it a nourishment far superior to that of the tepid meats offered in their dining room. Some again, ignoring altogether the main purpose of the midday break, sat basking on the wide sweep of steps that led up to the pompous, Victorian, pillared entrance.

Simon Fawcett came quietly from the darkness of the college entrance hall into the sunshine at the top of the steps. He paused there, looking down at the multitude and though he had made no sound in arriving and since then had not moved or spoken, a hundred eyes turned to look at him and many remained fixed, watching for a sign of recognition, hoping for acknowledgment or simply enjoying the grace and beauty of the figure set above them between the pillars.

For Simon had a singular beauty of face, a dark perfection that went well with his spare body, not over tall but well knit and reasonably strong. In repose, as now, he had an air of sadness, that might have conveyed an unbearable poignancy if it had not been so impersonal.

The crowd below him still watched expectantly. The physics lecturer, crossing the quadrangle with a senior mathematics tutor, gave a little exasperated laugh.

“Fawcett at public worship again,” he remarked, acidly.

The mathematician was more open-minded.

“I don’t think he does it deliberately. It isn’t his fault he happens to have a face like that.”

“Of course he does it deliberately. He adores the effect he makes.”

“Sheer vanity? I don’t agree.”

“You never will.”

They reached the door leading to the dining rooms and disappeared. Penelope Dane, lingering there, hoping against hope that Simon Fawcett would pass close by, on his own way

to lunch, heard the tail of their remarks, reddened in anger and dragged her eyes back to the open book in her hand to continue her pretence until all hope was gone.

Simon, the ritual of worship complete, the homage graciously accepted, caught sight of two of his senior history students lounging against the ornamental urns at the foot of the steps and giggling at their own wit. His face changed quite suddenly, breaking up into an eager, laughing, wholly boyish series of expressions as he ran lightly down the steps to join them. He thrust an arm through a crooked elbow of each and marched them off, bursting into their conversation as if he knew what had gone before and capping their sallies with a bite and bawdiness far beyond their range.

The professor of English literature and the President of the college, whose subject was philosophy, walked sedately down the steps. The sun had brought them out for the first time that spring. They had watched Simon's performance with a mixture of pleasure and faint disgust.

"Fawcett has been here for six years," the President said, "and I still can't make up my mind about him. A good brain, an adult mind and yet I find myself, as I did just then, when he ran down the steps, saying to myself, 'Who is this little mountebank?' Unfair?"

"Definitely. He's a first-class teacher of his subject. He even makes those two lads he's with now, work. They've both got excellent brains and they're as idle as hell. But Fawcett knows exactly how to handle them. Plays the fool with them, like this, but clamps down hard at the right time. They eat out of his hand and he'll drive them through a first-class honours degree, both of them."

"Oh, they're his slaves all right. So are a good many more. I suppose there's no harm in it – with him."

They exchanged knowing glances and the professor laughed.

"You don't imagine Fawcett is emotionally involved with any of this crowd, or ever has been, do you? He treats them all alike; he's kind, he likes them, he talks to them on their own level and keeps it all on the surface. Admirable."

The President nodded but he remained unconvinced. After a few turns in the sun he went indoors again, to enjoy a solitary lunch in his own room. The professor had a date with a friend at

the Athenaeum. Walking down to the main road he took a bus. His salary did not run to taxis, except very occasionally.

Near the door of the students' canteen Penelope Dane lingered, her eyes on the open page of her book, her ears alert for the sound of the beloved voice. When Simon, still linked to the two students, came within earshot she looked up, trying to pretend surprise, but so clumsily that she blushed at her own ineptitude. The young men were too preoccupied to notice her. Simon glanced in her direction, gave her a mechanically polite nod and swept past. Penelope, shutting her book with a violent gesture of anger, but suffering in her heart a sickening despair, moved away to sit on the steps and stare blindly at nothing.

Nothing was the key to her life at present, which for her meant Simon and only Simon. Every time, as now, she suffered some marked rebuff from him she thought of their first meeting and was once more most painfully confused. Before this year the boys and men she had met at her home, or at the Allinghams, or as fellow students, had without exception behaved in one of two ways. Either they were friendly, easy to get on with, eager to develop the acquaintance, or else they were awkward, totally uninterested. Simon fitted neither of these categories. At the Allinghams, where she and her father were dining, Simon had made a fifth. He had sat next to her: he had monopolised her, flattered her, amused her, touched her, wholly captivated her. She did not discover until the next day that he was on the staff at the college, because the term had only just begun and it was her first term there. She did not understand how deep and total was her infatuation until, after taking her once to the theatre and once to the ballet, his interest seemed to have faded as suddenly as it had appeared.

So this was the older man, she thought bitterly, sitting on the steps, drowning in her grief, but not willingly, rather thrashing about for some foothold in the depths. She might have guessed that a bachelor in his mid-thirties would be difficult. At the very least, different. She tried to be honest. What exactly did the whole thing amount to? She was in love, completely besotted, as Caroline, her friend, continually reminded her. And Simon? When she was with him he was kind, even tender: he was amusing, exciting, a well-informed man of the world. He caressed her with his eyes but he had never kissed her. He had

never come into her home, nor had she ever visited his. A theatre, a ballet, a few dinners at cheap restaurants. And now, when she had managed to get tickets for …

"Have you had your lunch or are you giving it a miss?"

He stood over her, looking down into the face she instantly lifted to his. She had neither seen nor heard his approach. She felt her cheeks grow hot again and even the pricking of tears in her eyes. She was furious.

"I'm on my way now," she said, only too well aware of the absurdity of this statement. She got to her feet. It was unbearable to be so near him and held at such a distance. She added, trying to smile, "I got those tickets."

"Tickets?"

"For the Festival Hall. Next Tuesday. You said …"

"Yes, I did, didn't I?"

He was not looking pleased. It was quite obvious that he did not want to prolong this meeting. His eyes flicked away from her and back as if he were calculating how much curiosity was growing in the minds of those about them.

Penelope wanted to move, but her limbs, being held by her heart, would not obey her mind. In extreme exasperation she said, "Of course if you don't *want* to go …"

"Why should you think that?"

It was said gently but it struck deep.

"Because … just now. Oh, what does it matter? What does anything matter?"

Simon drew in his breath and let it out slowly. She heard it as a sigh, a sign of boredom.

"I'll get Carol to go instead," she said, briskly.

"No." Simon held out a hand. "Give me the tickets. Meet me outside the Hall. Quarter of an hour before it starts. We'll feed afterwards."

Without a word she got the tickets from her handbag and gave them to him. His fingers touched hers as he took them, touched her wrist as he lifted his hand away. Penelope stood for a full minute after he left her and then walked slowly towards the canteen. She floated along in a golden mist of pleasure, her doubts destroyed, her reason snuffed out, her heart filled with a vague pity for her friends, who did not feel a lover's touch lingering on their hands.

She arrived five minutes early at the Festival Hall, Simon five minutes late. He was absorbed into the music for which he had a great love and real understanding, while Penelope sat entranced by his nearness, finding the whole performance magical, transformed and illuminated by her love. At dinner, afterwards, she suffered unexpected, total disillusion.

Simon had been thoroughly satisfied by the concert. It was indeed a splendid occasion, for the two Oistrakhs, father and son, were playing and in their hands the music sang and soared and glittered with a brilliance that was rare and intoxicating. They both left the Festival Hall excited, bemused, above themselves.

At the first road crossing Penelope stepped off the kerb into the oncoming traffic and Simon, recalled by the instant turmoil of shrieking brakes and horns, seized her hand and dragged her back. So uplifted were they that they only laughed and went on their way, a little more cautiously, but still with hands linked, across Waterloo Bridge and into the Strand and behind the Charing Cross hospital into St. Martins Lane and beyond, until Simon found the small restaurant he was looking for and they parted to take seats opposite one another.

Penelope then saw, from the way he looked at the menu and from his vague glance at herself that his thoughts, unlike hers, were far away, so far that he was scarcely aware of her presence. With a sudden chill at her heart she understood that his extreme pleasure had nothing whatever to do with herself except that he was grateful to her for providing the tickets for the concert. Indeed, after ordering for them both, a thing he had always done since their first meal alone together, he gave her his tender friendly smile and said, “You couldn’t have chosen a better programme, could you?”

She laughed, but heard it hollow.

“I didn’t, of course. I chose it for celebrity and they certainly lived up to it. They were marvellous, weren’t they?”

He did not bother to answer this, which made her feel her remark was too trivial and banal to merit a reply. Simon was looking at the wall behind her head. His eyes were sad now but a ghost of his smile still lingered. He looked both very young and very vulnerable.

“I heard Oistrakh the first time he came to England,” he said.

“The same total revelation of the music, the same extraordinary beauty. I was completely carried away, as I was today. In spite of the fact that my companion on that occasion was …” he paused long enough to gather Penelope’s unwilling, shrinking gaze, “… was someone I was, and indeed am, very fond of.” He repeated on a lingering note, “Very, very fond of.”

The waiter came with steaming soup. Penelope put a scalding spoonful into her mouth, welcoming the pain because it was less than the sudden agony of her stricken heart. The shock had been severe, as Simon meant it to be.

But Penelope was not without spirit. The older man again, her inner protest struggled to inform her, flaunting his experience. O.K. She’d play up to that.

She said, rather too loudly, summoning all her courage, “You mean a woman you were in love with?”

A shade passed over Simon’s face, a hint of anger that passed immediately. The usual charming smile, the light amused voice, came back.

“We were very deeply attached.” He looked away from her, glanced here and there round the restaurant, noted with satisfaction that his appearance had not been overlooked and returned his gaze to Penelope. He leaned forward towards her.

“We still are,” he said softly.

This time Penelope felt nothing. The news had already frozen her. The hurt was too great and too unexpected. For weeks she had observed him, had listened to discussions of him, noted that everyone found him sexually unapproachable. His name carried no scandal, unless a hint of essential impotence counted as such. Plainly his private life was a mystery to the students at the college. They were unwilling to believe it did not exist but they had no evidence whatever to the contrary.

Watching him now, as he waited for her reaction, Penelope was roused to a kind of protest.

“Why don’t you marry, then?” she asked, bluntly.

Simon’s smile grew even more compassionate, more all-embracing.

“She has children. I could not ask her to leave them,” he said.

“So she’s married already?”

“Of course.”

“Why of course?”

“Otherwise I would have married her.”

His arrogance struck her sharply.

“Would her husband have divorced her?”

Again she saw a flash of anger darken Simon’s face, but again it passed as quickly as before.

He spoke softly, his eyes again on the wall behind her, his vision turned inwards.

“He, too,” he said, “worships the ground she walks on.”

The waiter changed their plates, brought them generous fillet steaks, poured their wine. Penelope wondered if she could still swallow, but was determined to force the food down. She could not feel sicker than she did already.

Simon fell upon his meal with relish. His enjoyment of the concert had given him a good appetite. He was pleased to see that Penelope was eating well, too. It was not his fault that a string of mortally wounded figures strewed the trail behind him. Cheerful survivors always pleased him. He began to talk to Penelope about her college friends, particularly Caroline Feathers.

“You don’t share a flat with her, do you?”

“No. I live at home with Daddy. I must.”

“Why is that?”

“I keep house for him. Since Mother died.”

He was surprised to find that he knew so little of her background. Usually he was, and knew himself to be, very curious about his companions.

“She died four years ago,” Penelope said, beginning to feel more normal. She had always found him easy to talk to until she began to fall in love with him. Now that the love had been struck down with such a savage blow she felt strangely released and able to meet his questions in the old friendly easy way.

“Daddy isn’t at home much,” she said. “I mean except at weekends. But I don’t think it ever occurred to him to give up the house, even though it’s much too big for us. I was still at school when she died. We have a sort of cook-housekeeper, Mrs. Byrnes. A dear. She manages everything, really. I just have to be hostess when people come.”

“Your father is a barrister, isn’t he?”

“Yes.”

There was a pause while Simon considered the end of the

meal. He persuaded Penelope to have fruit while he ate cheese and ordered coffee to follow.

"Do you never go away on your own, then?" he asked at length.

"Not often. We haven't got many relations. I used to go to the Allinghams' cottage. They asked me after Mother died. Daddy is a great friend of Bill Allingham. But you know all that, don't you? I met you at the Allinghams."

She wondered a little that he had asked her for her father's profession.

"Yes," said Simon. "You were telling me about their cottage."

"Richard, that's their boy, was only ten then and Susan two years younger, about. But Bill's nephew turned up at times. He's in the Navy. Daddy used to have him to crew for him."

"To what?"

"We've got a yacht. Daddy has, I mean. We always cruise in the summer. Mother didn't like sailing. I adore it."

"So you are a permanent crew?"

"Oh, yes. John never gets away now. Too tied up in the Navy. Do you ever sail?"

"Certainly not. I detest waves, even small ones. Crossing the Channel is a misery."

Penelope felt this as an extra bar between them, but as Simon encouraged her to go on talking about herself and her family she forgot this. When they left the restaurant she was outwardly cheerful, happy, grateful for the meal he had given her, in fact thoroughly pleased with her evening. On parting he pressed her hand between both of his and turned away very content with his conduct of affairs. Penelope went home by bus in a mounting cloud of despair, to spend half the night in bitter tears and the rest in exhausted sleep from which she awoke with swollen eyelids and a raging headache. Mrs. Byrnes diagnosed the case correctly but did not think it merited any special treatment at Penelope's age. Hubert Dane decided that his daughter was sickening for 'flu and ordered her to bed for the day, in spite of her protests, pointing out that she had no right to spread infection among the other students.

After leaving Penelope Simon walked slowly through the crowded streets to the flat of his friend George Clark in Hampstead. Simon himself had a flat in Kilburn.

George was in and welcomed his friend. A physicist, who had left teaching for industry because the pay was so much better and the laboratory equipment so much more modern, George always enjoyed Simon's total ignorance of science and his acute, if superficial outlook on the world and its ways.

Simon described his evening in some detail.

"Another victim?" George asked, smiling.

Simon laughed.

"Is it my fault if they take me so seriously?"

"Isn't it?"

"I protest."

"You may protest, but you can't deny it. You adore admiration."

"Who doesn't? I consider I'm very good for them. 'L'éducation sentimentale.' No fees in it, though God knows I sometimes have to work very hard."

"And this poor girl? Was it the usual coup de grace? Did you trot out the beloved mistress, your own faithfulness, the great sacrifice?"

Simon laughed again, half from real amusement, half embarrassed.

"She exists, you know."

"Does she?"

George had never quite believed in his friend's grand passion. He never quite believed any of Simon's stories, whether they were about himself, as they usually were, or of wider scope, about people he had known. George enjoyed Simon because he was different from everyone else he met in his daily round at the laboratory and because he presented to George's very peaceable, highly intellectual personality no emotional problems of any kind whatever.

Chapter Two

Diana Allingham stood close to the big open window of her drawing room on the third floor of the house in Welmore Street.

A sunblind in the form of a canopy jutted out from the top of the window, shading the spot where she stood. But the hot June air, full of London dust and petrol fumes, seared her lungs at every breath. The sun bit at her through the canopy. She felt her thin dress stick to the naked skin of her back as she moved restlessly, trying to see down into the street far below, but not really caring whether she did so or not. It was a habit from the past, from the time when Bill, sweeping successfully to the top of his profession, had put up his plate on the door down there in the street, adding it to half a dozen others and therewith acquiring a small dark consulting room at the back of the house. He had also managed to secure this flat, three storeys up, where he and Diana had lived ever since.

She often wondered now why Bill had insisted upon staying in the flat. When the two children were young it had been far too small. Her objections of that period were over-ruled by the appearance of the country cottage. Now that the children were at boarding school, with the holidays spent at the cottage, except at Christmas, the flat was once more large enough, even too large. But on mid-summer days, such as this one, it was hell, Diana decided.

She pulled up the window at the bottom and the roar of the traffic grew louder than before. She pulled it down again and leaned her forehead on the cool glass. As she did so two hands took her from behind.

She swayed back with a little cry and Simon's hard head came round her shoulder to kiss her neck and slide his lips down to her breast.

"I didn't hear you come in," she said stupidly, breathing deeply under his touch.

"Why should you? You were watching the street, though what you find there …"

She could not be bothered to explain the habit again. He knew

it too well. Besides, it now had no meaning, or no worthy one. When they first lived here – no, longer – until she met Simon – her watching had been to discover if Bill had returned to the house. Now it was to discover if he were absent.

She released herself, to move away from him and sink into a chair.

"I didn't expect you today," she said, dully. The heat had drained her. It was not an afternoon for lovemaking.

"Isn't it one of the safe days?"

She winced a little. His quite frank, deliberate deception of Bill always shocked her. He had never ceased to admire and respect Bill, to treat him as a friend and accept his friendship in return. He was the most a-moral being she had ever met.

"You aren't expecting William back, are you?" he insisted. "That wasn't why you were glued to the window so intently that you didn't hear me come in?"

"No," she said, lifting her arms from the chair and putting them down again on a different part of the cool chintz. "No. He won't be back. I hope you didn't meet anyone on the way up."

"The lift was empty."

She frowned.

"Did you have to wait for it?"

"No. It was there and the formidable Mrs. Stone was nowhere about and no one saw me and here I am and I want you."

He had been standing near the window where she had left him when she moved away. He now came quickly to her, took her hands, pulled her to her feet, quickly and skilfully unfastened her dress and lifted her from the little heap of linen that had dropped to her feet.

She moaned softly as his hands moved over her. Even on a day like this her desire burned up her separate identity, her possible protests, even her anticipation of pleasure or her fear of spoiling it. She was in pain until he took her; her subjection was total.

Simon, bright-eyed, well pleased with himself and with her, watched her smilingly as she gradually came back from her ecstasy. When he saw that she looked at him with cool eyes he looked at his watch.

"Time to dress," he said, patting her thigh in a kindly, indulgent manner. "Not one of the days I've just dropped in to

see William. I've got a date."

"Who with?" she asked, instantly jealous. There had been rumours, roundabout ones, but fairly definite, that he had been seen with Penelope Dane. She already deeply regretted having asked Simon to dinner on the same night as the Danes.

"Only George. And I hope you see nothing sinister in that."

"Of course not."

"There's no of course about it. It has become quite dangerous for a man to have a man for his friend."

"You exaggerate."

"No, really. You should hear the common room gossip. Quite astonishing."

They dressed and Diana fetched two long iced drinks. They sat well away from each other, sipping dreamily.

Diana said, "You won't have to be so reckless from now on."

"I'm never reckless. I'm most careful not even to risk compromising you. Isn't that what it's called?"

"I mean because Bill's mother is coming here."

"Oh."

He looked across at her with a faintly malicious smile twitching the corners of his mouth.

"No, darling, I mean it. She's having alterations done to her terrible old country house. Main drainage and main water have come at last to Little Fairing and she will benefit. But the whole place will be practically torn down and rebuilt or so I gather."

"How astonishing. Has she lived all these years without a bath?"

"Of course not. There is a well and an old gardener who pumps every evening and a cart that comes every three months to deal with a cesspool."

Simon began to look bored.

"All I meant," persisted Diana, "was that you mustn't simply barge in whenever you feel inclined. You'll have to ring me up first and be very careful if she happens to get to the phone first. I'm afraid she'll be here for *weeks*."

Simon still looked bored. Diana was not sure if he had taken in what she had told him. He had a disconcerting habit of simply not hearing things that did not particularly interest him.

"Did you hear that?" she asked, sharply.

Simon frowned and then laughed.

“That we shall see much less of one another in the very near future? Yes, I heard that.”

“Oh, *no*!” She was breathless with fear. “Only that we must be more careful. At the moment you aren’t careful at all, really. If Bill wasn’t such a …”

“If William wasn’t William would you ever have become my mistress?”

The smile was on his face again. It hurt her to see how little he was impressed by her mother-in-law’s imminent intrusion.

“It had nothing to do with Bill,” she said, in a low voice. “I was lost the first time I met you.”

This was an expected answer and again he accepted her words easily, lightly. Far too lightly, her heart told her with a vaguely jealous pang. His looks, his infinite easy charm, had spoiled him. His life was a perpetual walk-over where other people were concerned. Walked over, trodden under foot, but so lightly, so laughingly that the treading did not damage, only the lifting of the pressure, the passing on.

“Cheer up,” he said, putting down his empty glass and getting to his feet. “I’ll manage.”

“To come?” she asked, aware that she was nagging, but unable to control it. “To come or to do without me?”

“A little bit of both,” said Simon, still smiling and moving now towards the door.

“Aren’t you going to kiss me before you go?”

He hated the acid note in her voice. Would she never learn?

He waited near the door for her to come to him.

“I’m not good at affectionate exchanges,” he said, putting his hands on her shoulders and looking into her eyes with a strange blank look in his own. “Passion I understand …”

“But love – no,” she answered, aware that all this had been said many times over.

She had no satisfaction from the meaningless embrace with which they parted, but she stood in the open door of the flat until she heard the lift arrive in the hall.

Simon was late in reaching George Clark’s house where he had been invited to dine that evening. He had considered walking there from Welmore Street but after leaving the shade between the high cliffs of the professional rabbit warren, he had come into the full blaze of the late afternoon sun and had

promptly gone out of his course into Regent's Park, where he had sat under a tree, forgetting the time until the lengthening shadows brought him unwillingly to his feet again. The buses now were crowded, with long queues of homing workers standing along the kerb. He took a taxi.

This was a move into which his nature often led him, though it was an extravagance he could not afford. On the whole he managed to compensate for it in a great variety of ways, from cadging lifts in other people's cars to frank borrowing of small sums which he usually failed to pay back.

George was aware of this habit. He saw the taxi draw up as he was watching at his window for Simon's arrival, so he went down at once to the foot of the steps, fumbling in his pocket for silver as he did so.

"You might …" began Simon, also fumbling as George came up. "He may not have change for a note."

"Change, guv?" said the taxi driver, pulling out a mixed up mass of silver and paper.

"O.K.," said George. He paid, his coins were added to the rest and thrust back into the man's pocket. George took his friend by the elbow and walked him quickly into the house.

"Late, as usual," he said when he had got his visitor across the hall.

"Later than that, I'm afraid," said Simon, showing no signs of contrition.

George called to his housekeeper and took Simon at once to the dining table. From long experience and a miraculous judgment Mrs. Tranter produced a perfect meal, unspoiled by the long delay.

"You don't deserve it," George said. "One day I shall eat the lot at the stated time and you'll starve."

"It isn't my fault I can't live by the clock," Simon argued. "Anyway, you have your meal so bloody early."

"Mrs. Tranter doesn't live in. She has to get away home. You have to be punctual at the college. Why victimise your friends?"

"It relieves the strain," Simon answered, simply.

"It isn't as if you had no watch," George went on. He was still feeling cross with himself for paying the taxi fare, which had been quite unnecessary, since Simon, just too late, had pulled some silver from his pocket and then dropped it back again.

“You have a very fine watch. I don’t know why your father gave it to you, knowing you never look at it. But you could make some attempt to do so.”

“I couldn’t just now,” said Simon, eating steadily and with relish, for he had denied himself any lunch that day. “It’s in pawn,” he explained.

“You’re hopeless.”

They both laughed.

“Tell me the latest scandal at your dump,” George suggested, seeing that his friend was in good form.

“The college has been conducting its affairs with unusual discretion,” Simon answered. “The usual couples go about together as before but nothing new has developed to astonish us. My own difficulties have ended virtuously.”

“And what exactly do you mean by that?”

“The character I told you about, the elderly goat who has been plying me with patronage came suddenly to the point the other night. He had given me an exceptionally good meal – almost as good as this – at his own house and then, when we were discussing – his own special subject – he said, without altering the level of his voice in any way, ‘Well, dear boy, and when do we go to bed?’”

“What exactly did you answer?”

“I said, in the same kind of voice, ‘We don’t, sir. Neither tonight or at any time.’ He seemed to be rather shocked, but I went on to tell him that my tastes did not lie that way at all. Then I left.”

“Good for you.”

“Not at all good for me. He was worth a great deal of excellent information, delightful talk and splendid food. I shall miss him a lot.”

George got up from the table and while Mrs. Tranter cleared it and brought coffee he got out brandy and poured a generous tot for Simon and a small one for himself.

Simon was leaning against the mantelpiece as George went up to him. He put out a sly foot to trip his host, but George was prepared. He managed to avoid the snare, got the brandy glass safely bestowed and turned to exact revenge.

“Like a pair of schoolboys,” Mrs. Tranter reported to her niece when she got home that night. “At their age, gone thirty the

both of them. Scrapping on the floor like a pair of silly teenagers. No harm in it, of course. Mr. Clark's a very nice gentleman and serious too, in the ordinary way. It never comes over him but when Mr. Fawcett's in the house."

A little breathless from their exertions both men soon gave up, scrambled to their feet and sat down, hot and breathless, to sip the scalding coffee. George, who never got over his surprise at Simon's hidden strength, stared at his friend. His thoughts, less tolerant now, for he had suffered a mildly strained wrist, returned to Simon's latest preposterous anecdote. Was it true? Quite possibly. Equally, it might be an invention. Simon's vanity was immense and totally unselfconscious. It was constantly fed by these day-dreams, these scurrilous fantasies. And yet –

"So your latest doubtful friendship has gone the way of the rest?" he said. "I'm surprised at …"

"No names," Simon interrupted, in a low voice, with a glance at the door.

"She can't hear and wouldn't take it in if she did."

"I wouldn't rely on that."

"Anyway, the affair is over?"

"There was no affair, but yes, it is over. No damage on either side. Just a pity, from my point of view."

"You're very quick to brush off other people's feelings, aren't you?"

Simon frowned.

"I grant you this man is not likely to suffer much from your refusal," George went on. "He must have other resources. He is experienced and wealthy. I've no sympathy for him, certainly no pity. But I think you should stop leading people up the garden. As much for your own sake as theirs."

As Simon stared at him George saw the shutter come down. A moment before his friend was looking at him with an amused, boyish, slightly cynical expression. Now a stranger regarded him from eyes sullen, withdrawn and coldly hostile. The man behind these different eyes, behind the shutter, was a secret unknown being.

"I don't mean to needle you," George persisted, knowing he spoke against his own better judgment and quite uselessly. "I just can't help remembering that boy a couple of years ago. The one who emigrated suddenly in his last year without taking his

degree."

"What of him?" asked Simon, the stranger, calmly.

"Well, you certainly did harm to him."

"I refused to have sexual relations with him. Was that harmful? Was that immoral? Should I have indulged his unnatural feelings? Laid us both open to criminal proceedings? My dear George, where is your common sense?"

"You should have seen what he was like at the beginning. You should have put him off from the start."

Simon did not bother to answer. He simply gazed at the wall behind George's shoulder.

"I wish I had made you tell me his name," George went on, more to himself than to the other.

"So that you could interfere?" Simon asked, coldly.

"So that I could perhaps have shown him he was not to blame or not deficient or merely unfortunate. So that I could have explained to him how lightly these things affect you."

"Lightly!"

The shutter lifted for an instant and George had a glimpse of startled rage and a strange suffering. Then it fell again.

Simon got up, thanked his friend politely and prepared to leave. George was aware that he had gone too far. He regretted it, since this would be Simon's last visit for some time.

"Don't go yet," he urged. "I shall be away now for three months. My firm's sending me to the U. S."

"I hope you enjoy it," Simon answered, still moving towards the door.

"It was the U. S., wasn't it – or was it Canada – that boy went to?" George said, trying to force a conclusion that would leave Simon free to continue the evening with him in friendship.

As there was no answer he finished, lamely, "I hope he found some peace of mind and friendship wherever he went."

"I think he may have done so," Simon answered, gravely. He said goodbye to George and thanked him with a bright smile for an excellent evening.

Chapter Three

William Allingham drew together the various papers on his desk and sat for a few minutes looking at the pile before pressing the bell for his secretary.

He had just finished a session in his consulting room in Welmore Street. It had taken him three hours and consisted of six patients; two American business men, two elderly widows in need of occupation, two genuine chronic asthmatics.

Dr. Allingham's speciality was not an exacting one, though it provided him with an absorbing interest and used his undoubted ability, his keen brain, his abundant energy to the full. He was an endocrinologist, with a special interest as well in all forms of allergy, which took him rather outside his particular field into those of the chest and skin specialists. But it also kept him from being swamped by ageing women mistakenly set upon buying back a semblance of their youth. This might be and was, in some hands, a very profitable line, but not one that appealed to him. He preferred to work in general hospitals for the full number of sessions allowed and paid for by the National Health Service and to augment his income to the required figure with a private practice where each patient could have the maximum attention and investigation while being perfectly well able to pay for it.

Having collected his papers into a heap Dr. Allingham went through them slowly, extracting a page here and there, putting together reports that had strayed apart, occasionally pulling out an irrelevancy to crumple it up and throw it in the waste-paper basket.

Having finished this task he summoned his secretary and dictated to her a series of letters, most of them to the general practitioners who had passed on the patients to him, a few to experienced patients themselves who were waiting at home for the results of recent tests. After he had gone through the pile again in this way, the secretary left him to type out the letters and Dr. Allingham put away the notes and reports himself in their separate files in a large cabinet and locked them up. He then took the lift to his flat, knowing that Mrs. Stone would

come up presently with the letters for him to sign. Though he shared her services with three other consultants and she acted as receptionist as well to all of them, she never seemed to be overwhelmed by her work. So now he had not even asked her to bring the letters up to the flat. He knew she would look into the consulting room first and then take the lift up.

The flat was empty when he arrived there. This did not surprise him. The morning daily came at nine and left at two. On the days when they had people in to dine, another helper managed the meal. Otherwise Diana cooked it herself. Tonight they had nobody coming. He looked at his watch, saw that the time was just after six and decided that Diana would be home at any time now. He refused to let himself wonder in definite terms where she might be, but instead poured himself a whisky and soda and took it to the window, where, after pulling back the sunblind, no longer needed, he stood looking out at the roofs opposite and beyond.

The sound of the front door bell made him start. It was too soon for Mrs. Stone. He frowned. A caller would be a bore. He was tired or rather he was emptied of any wish to communicate. Six patients had drained him in the course of that hot June afternoon. But he went at once to the door and opened it. His great friend, Hubert Dane, stood on the threshold.

"Well!" he said. "You!"

"I know," Dane said, walking past him and making straight for the drawing room. "I know. You're surprised. You might have been out. Why didn't I ring up?"

"Why didn't you?" William asked.

"Only decided to come in a few minutes ago, on my way to the Club."

"You'll stay now you've come, won't you? Diana's out at the moment, but she's due back any minute."

He tried to speak as if he knew where she was, or as if it were not important in any case, but he thought he failed.

Hubert glanced at him briefly and looked away.

"I wanted to have a word with you about Penny," he said and seemed to be unable to go on.

William found him a drink and persuaded him to stop wandering about the room and sit down.

"Ever since Phil died …" he began vaguely.

“I know,” William interrupted him. “You feel helpless. You don’t know how to cope with a teenage daughter. You feel inadequate. But surely Penny couldn’t be growing up nicer, prettier, more successful, more admired …”

“She’s fallen in love with a man twice her age whom I hesitate to call an out and out stinker because he happens to be a friend of yours.”

“Simon Fawcett?” asked William immediately and stared defiantly at his friend, quite aware of the implication of his spot diagnosis.

“So you agree with me?” Hugh said, grimly.

William reddened.

“I don’t know,” he said crossly. “I’ve no right to criticise him. I’m sorry for him, in a way. He can’t help looking like a rather undersized dark god or angel. It’s bad luck on any man to have such an appearance, especially in this country, where male beauty has always been suspect and just now is synonymous with perversion. Fawcett is extremely popular at the college and is a very valuable member of the staff there. So I’ve been told.”

“By Fawcett or someone reliable?” asked Hubert.

He spoke with such bitterness that William was shocked.

“Not by Fawcett. What have you got against him?”

“I’ve told you. Penny is head over ears in love with the blighter.”

“And he?”

Hubert got up and moved restlessly about the room again. “I don’t know. I don’t *know*, I tell you. But I’m desperately worried. If only Phil … She’d have been able …”

“Yes,” said William gently and went on, “Hasn’t Penny got any particular girl friends she’s likely to have confided in?”

“Yes. There’s Caroline Feathers. Very nice child, often comes to the house. What d’you suggest? That I ask whether my daughter has been seduced by a member of the college staff?”

William said, slowly, “From what you say I should imagine she has *not* been seduced. She would not be miserable, as you imply she is, if her feelings were shared. On the contrary.”

“She ought to be miserable, either way,” said Hubert gloomily. “It’s an immoral age,” he added, going back to his chair and sitting down again with a heavy sigh.

“I shouldn’t take it too seriously,” William said. “Did Penny

tell you herself she was in love with this chap?"

"No, of course not."

"Then why are you so sure?"

"Because she never stops talking about him. Not in relation to herself. She's pathetically careful not to do that. But anecdotes about his kindness, his cleverness, his jokes … I'm sick to death of his name. It isn't as if I didn't know something of the other side of the picture."

"But Penny does tell you when she's been out with him?"

"Oh yes. She tries not to, but it bursts out of her. Or did. I think that phase is over."

"Ah! Why do you say that?"

"She's very depressed. Something's happened. I wish to God I knew what."

"And I don't mind betting he's turned her down. It wouldn't be the first time. I think there's a big streak of neurosis in Fawcett. Endocrine unbalance, I suspect."

"Don't get on the hobby horse *now*, of all moments!"

William laughed and went no further. But his belief in a medical basis for Simon's peculiarities was serious. In fact it was the one thing he held to in his constant, persisting unease about Diana. He dared not let it go. However Hubert, he saw, would not be impressed, "She'll get over it," he said, including Diana in his thoughts. "She's very young. I remember being desperately in love with a rapid succession of girls about every six months at that age."

"Penny has never been like this before. She's never taken any man seriously. Not even John."

"He'd like to marry her, wouldn't he?"

"He told me so. But he hasn't had much chance this year. Been in the Med most of the time. Couldn't even crew for me last summer."

"A pity. Where is he now?"

"Gib. And likely to be fully occupied this summer, too."

"But you will be cruising? And taking Penny?"

"If she'll come."

"Of course she will. She's as keen on it as you are. As you always were. Your best move is to find some personable youngster to crew for you. Preferably someone who already knows and likes Penny. He might catch her on the rebound and

solve your problem in one."

Hubert put down his glass.

"I don't think it's anything to joke about," he said, stiffly.

"I couldn't be more serious," William assured him. "It sounds like a tuppenny novelette, I know, but it's the sort of thing that could easily happen. You try it. And for God's sake don't go on worrying about Fawcett. He may be a bit of a menace but there's no real harm in him. He's been at the college six years now. Do you think if he was a wrong ' un some scandal wouldn't have broken before this?"

"Hasn't it?" said Hubert. "What about the Darson case? Or don't you call suicide a scandal?"

"I don't, as a rule," said William, coldly. "I call it a tragedy or a medical failure or an inevitable part of an incurable disease, according to circumstances. I've never called it a scandal."

"Not even when a scandal induced it?"

"Can't you explain?" William said, irritably. He felt he had endured enough of Hubert's obsession. "You talk about Penny being lost in love for this fellow. You seem to me to be pretty well lost in hate for the same man. Are you sure you haven't got an inverted Oedipus complex?"

"Don't be obscene!" said Hubert, furiously.

William refilled their glasses and sat quite silent while Hubert recovered his temper, though not his sense of proportion.

"The boy Darson broke his own college career on Fawcett's account," he said, at length. "He decided to go to Canada and his parents managed to get him a place in a college there to continue his work. He was lost at sea on the way over. He left a note in his cabin for Fawcett, which the captain very rightly gave to the parents, together with all his possessions. They consulted me."

"After opening Fawcett's letter themselves?"

"Yes. I think they were justified."

"I see. So you read the letter, too?"

"I did."

"What did it prove? That Fawcett had ruined this boy?"

"Fawcett had turned him down. But not before they had reached a position of considerable intimacy."

"What d' you mean by that?"

"Everything short of physical intimacy."

“Oh, for Christ’s sake!” William was exasperated. “An unbalanced lad with homosexual leanings gets a crush on an older man, is quite rightly put in his place, goes off in an hysterical state and drowns himself. Blame his unobservant, ignorant parents, but not – really not – Fawcett!”

“You don’t understand. I told them there was nothing they could do. I told them they must let Fawcett have the letter. Or rather I would give it to him, telling him not to destroy it in case the body turned up and there was an inquest. This is unlikely as Darson disappeared in mid-Atlantic. But I thought it might serve as a warning to him. I also warned the parents against attempting any sort of action against Fawcett. I explained the danger of a libel action. They had no wish for publicity, poor things. It would have done more harm to their boy’s memory than anything else.”

He stopped speaking, looking at William with a kind of horror in his eyes.

“I shall never forget Fawcett’s face when he read the letter.”

“He was shocked by it?”

“For one instant he was shocked and terrified. Abject terror. Then he drew himself up and read it to the end and stood looking at it as still as a statue, with a hard look on his face that I can’t describe. He reminded me of those Egyptian things on vases – sacrifices – priests in masks – you know what I mean?”

“The dark gods,” murmured William. “Saturnalia – the devil and all his works … It dies hard, our inheritance.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Hubert said, suspiciously, afraid once more that his friend was treating him lightly.

“I’m not sure that I do myself,” William answered. “But I think Penny’s safe enough. Her feelings, however strong, are clearly normal. It makes all the difference. And girls definitely don’t go into a decline for love, these days.”

“I never thought they did.”

“Take her away on the boat. Get a promising crew. When are you going?”

“In a fortnight. Actually I’ve got two boys lined up already that Penny knows and likes.”

“Better and better. Rivals should help to restore her self-esteem. Help her to make up her mind, too. At least, engage her interest.”

Hubert looked at his friend with disapproval.

"I don't know why you choose to be flippant over the whole thing. The poor child is very genuinely miserable. To her it's all serious in the extreme."

"Of course it is. All the more reason for us to make light of it."

"I don't agree."

"No," said William, suddenly allowing himself to become serious. "No, I suppose you can't."

Hubert did not stay long after that. Though William had not been much help it had been a relief to state his case to him. For an uncommitted person his views and arguments were probably sound. They would be shared by most of his other friends, perhaps not wholeheartedly by those with grown-up daughters. That was really the trouble with William. His own children were still too young to present him with modern problems. Pity he had married comparatively late. It had been a slight barrier between them ever since.

When he had seen Hubert into the lift William went back into the drawing room, collected the glasses and took them away to the kitchen sink, where he left them on the draining board. He moved mechanically, his thoughts still with Hubert and his feelings roused to a degree of pity for Penelope he had altogether concealed from his friend.

He knew very well why he had behaved as he had, why any discussion of Simon Fawcett induced in him the same responses. It was necessary for his own peace of mind, on account of Diana. He had to believe in the portrait of Simon he had painted for Hubert: he had to rely on the man's shallow approach to life; on the truth of his seeming immaturity, in spite of his well-developed mind; he had to put away from his thoughts such stories as Hubert had related that day and this was not the only one of its kind, though the most hideous. Because otherwise – on account of Diana – his own life would be in danger of crumbling into ruin. His personal life and through it, what was to him of even greater importance, his life's work, his patient, persistent, unremitting, exacting, voyage of discovery in narrow, but to him all-compelling waters.

Diana arrived home about ten minutes after Hubert left. She was hot and tired, longing to strip and get into a tepid bath. But seeing William look so worried and forlorn, both inclination and

instinct took her to him, to kiss him affectionately and ask what was the matter.

"Hubert's been in. Worrying himself to death over Penny."

Diana frowned, remembering the rumours.

"Penny? What's the matter with her?"

"He thinks she is suffering from unrequited love."

"Isn't that a bit vague to get het up over?"

William did not like this stalling. Diana must have heard the rumours if he had, though they had never discussed them.

She glanced at him now, saw she had gone too far in assumed innocence and said carelessly, moving away, "Hubert doesn't mean Simon, does he? That horse never did run."

"Naturally he means Simon. Are you sure – quite sure – there's nothing in it? On his side, I mean. Obviously Penny has been seriously hurt. Is that entirely her own fault? Can it be entirely a girl's fault?"

Diana's eyes opened wide. She was very angry.

She said, with emphasis, with passion, "Entirely her own fault! Indeed, *yes*. And serve her right! He's always being plagued by these childish crushes. He's bored to death with it. He …"

She stopped for want of breath.

"You know him very well, don't you?" William said. "If he confides in you to this extent …"

He broke off, too, and staring at one another they both lost their nerve and fled from the danger revealed.

"I *must* get into a bath," Diana said. "I feel disgusting. Dinner's in the frig. All cold. I couldn't face cooking on a day like this."

"Why should you?" answered William, politely. "Don't hurry. I'm not particularly hungry." He looked at his watch. "Mrs. Stone hasn't been up with my letters. Being tactful on account of Hubert, I expect. I'd better go down. There's a paper, too, I ought to read tonight."

He stopped himself. He was running on too obviously. Diana nodded and left him.

In the cool peace and gloom of his little consulting room on the ground floor, William sat with his colleague's learned paper in his hand, slowly recovering from the shock of his near approach to a battlefield.

Lying in her bath upstairs Diana blamed herself for the sudden

dreadful danger.

"I was a fool," she thought, "the most awful bloody fool to let her meet him outside the college. I might have realised she isn't a child any longer."

She shuddered, inventing for herself a host of unknown women who might be her rivals.

Chapter Four

Mrs. Allingham arrived in Welmore Street at the end of the first week in July. Diana met her at Paddington, dutifully assembled her suitcases, found a taxi, had the suitcases conveyed into the house with the active assistance of Mrs. Stone and later, while Mrs. Allingham rested, unpacked them for her and disposed of the contents in the various built-in cupboards and shelves of the principal spare room.

The brilliant sun that had scorched the town during most of June had been replaced by heavy cloud and a disagreeable drying wind that sent the parched dust whirling about the streets. The air remained hot, suffocatingly so. Mrs. Allingham, who was a tall heavy old woman in her early seventies, had found the whole journey very trying and as she sat in Diana's drawing room, leaning back on a pile of cushions in an armchair, with her swollen ankles supported on a lower chair in front of her, she longed for her own sheltered cottage below the Cotswold hills and regretted the progress of sanitation that had overtaken it and her. She felt that the well and the cesspool could very easily have lasted her time. The next few weeks would be a great strain. The garden would get out of hand in her absence. July was the very last month to choose to be in London when you were old and fat and becoming arthritic and had lost any interest you ever had in the theatre, in music and art. She was ready to acknowledge at this moment that the interest had always been small.

Shutting her eyes Mrs. Allingham set herself to conquer her inner complaints. In her present state of anarchy she felt quite seriously cut off from the higher sources of comfort. As her whole present life was built round her religious beliefs and observances, the case, she realised, was urgent.

But hardly had she forced herself into a positive joy on behalf of the village of Little Fairing, for whose inhabitants the coming of the drains would mean so much in health and comfort, hardly had she confessed the meanness of her own selfish attitude, scarcely had she remembered that she would have daily contact

with her much loved and seldom seen, distinguished, highly successful son, William, than Diana swept into the room, carrying a tray with tea, thin buttered toast and a plate of varied sweet biscuits.

The tea, which she felt she did not deserve, revived Mrs. Allingham. Diana's attentions gave her renewed feelings of guilt, but she became calmer on the whole.

"I'm afraid I'm giving you a lot of extra work and worry," she said. "I wish it hadn't been necessary. Perhaps I ought to have stayed with the Brunts."

"Who are they?"

"The vicar and his wife. Don't you remember them? When you called in on your way back from Cornwall last summer?"

"I forgot the name. Yes, I remember them now."

"They wanted to put me up, but I didn't want to be a burden to them. Besides, they would have been offended if I'd insisted on being a paying guest and I couldn't have gone to them otherwise."

"Quite so," said Diana.

Cheaper far for the old girl to come up to the flat, she thought. Why couldn't she say so straight out? They didn't grudge her anything. Religion made people very tortuous. What a bore the next few weeks were going to be.

"How long will the job take?" she asked and added quickly, "Of course you must stay until it is finished. I was just thinking of the school holidays."

"I know," said Mrs. Allingham, unhappily. "So was I."

This was not strictly true, but it was another thing she must turn into a matter for rejoicing. She saw far too little of her grandchildren. If only she could understand Diana better – or not so well, suggested her baser nature, uppermost on this distressful day.

As time passed Mrs. Allingham, always striving for peace of mind, for tolerance, for love; always taking her difficulties to God and usually finding strength from that source, did manage to work out a daily routine and way of life that went smoothly, avoided direct conflict of any kind and left both her and her daughter-in-law free to follow their very different kinds of existence. This helped Diana very greatly, because she soon got to know at what definite times of the day she could rely upon

Mrs. Allingham being occupied with religious observance, either at church or in her own room. When she had managed to impress upon Simon the need to follow this time-table himself in his visits to her, she lost her uncomfortable sense of strain and even felt a certain exhilaration when she thought how much high-minded assistance Mrs. Allingham was affording her in her affair with her lover.

July drew towards its end. The work at Little Fairing was at its height. William drove down with his mother and Diana one Sunday to inspect it and found the whole village street torn up, with ditches plunging away up side roads and mud everywhere. At the cottage a narrow wooden plank crossed the ditch to give access to the garden gate.

Clearly Mrs. Allingham could not go back just yet. Equally clearly the children would be impossible in the flat at such close quarters and besides, they ought to be away in the country. On the journey home he and Diana wrangled over various plans without finding a solution. Mrs. Allingham felt sad, but carefully refrained from interfering.

In the end it was Mrs. Stone, as usual, who solved the difficulty. She had a widowed sister who would be only too pleased to look after Dr. Allingham's own cottage and the children for as long as he needed her. She would get a nice holiday that way and she liked and understood children. It seemed to be a way out.

One morning in the following week Mrs. Allingham, emerging from her room at about ten in the morning, as was her habit, held out the folded newspaper to Diana.

"I see the Dane girl is engaged," she said, calmly. "How quickly these children grow up."

With a chill at her heart and fingers she could hardly keep from shaking Diana took the paper and read.

"Richard Carrington? Carrington? Do we know any Carringtons?"

Her relief was so great she was half laughing, her face all smiles. Mrs. Allingham was astonished.

"Don't you? I expect William does. He knows all Hubert Dane's friends."

"That doesn't guarantee this boy is one of them. More likely not," she said, sharply. Then changed her mind and added, "No.

I expect you're right. They've been away sailing. I expect he was with them. Well, what a blessing!"

Mrs. Allingham looked thoughtful. She was not entirely ignorant of Penelope's recent troubles. Though she had not been able to discuss them with Hubert or Penny herself, since they were away, she had heard a good deal on the subject from William and also from Hubert's married sister, with whom she had lunched once or twice since she arrived in London. But she said nothing. Diana's attitude implied a certain impatience with the girl. Nothing else.

"I must write to Penny," she murmured. "I hope she'll be very happy. She's a dear girl. How her poor mother would have …"

"They must be *back*!" cried Diana. "I didn't think …"

She felt confused. The sudden intrusion of the Danes was totally unexpected. Somehow she had put them away from her mind as they had faded for the time being from her life. But here they were again in a very disturbing aspect. How would it affect Simon? He was still in London. He had been with her only two days before. The college term was over but he was supervising and taking part in one of the inevitable summer schools there. What would he think? What would he do? She wanted to get on the telephone, to the Dane's house, to Simon, to Hubert's sister. But Mrs. Allingham had already crossed the room and was settling herself at the telephone table and picking up the directory. It was no good, she would have to wait.

In a fever of impatience she left the room and went into the kitchen to occupy herself while she struggled for control.

When she went back a little later, the room was empty, but Mrs. Allingham appeared almost at once, in hat and long black summer coat, pulling on her gloves.

"I shall not be in to lunch, dear," she said.

"Did you get on to Penny?"

"No. They are still away. The notice was sent from Majorca, Nora tells me. Hubert is leaving his boat there and they are all flying home at the end of the week. You were quite right. Richard Carrington has been one of the crew. It sounds very suitable."

Again relief swept over Diana. By the time the Danes got back the news would be stale. Had Hubert arranged that on purpose? No, he was not subtle enough. He was simply overjoyed at the

success of his plans.

"Poor Penny," said Mrs. Allingham, unexpectedly, at dinner that evening.

Diana was startled.

"I lunched with Nora," Mrs. Allingham went on. "She told me a great deal more of what she had only hinted at before. I mean, of course …"

"You mean the ridiculous fuss over her adolescent crush on Simon Fawcett. I simply can't imagine why everyone made so much of such a trivial matter."

"Nothing to do with Mr. Fawcett can possibly be called trivial," said Mrs. Allingham, seriously. "That is not the word. He is a most dangerous man."

"No really!" Diana was exasperated.

"I'm sure William agrees with me," his mother persisted.

He looked up, unwilling to be brought into such an unprofitable argument.

"Actually, I don't," he said, quietly. "No, mother, I don't. He's a queer person in some ways. I have strictly medical views on that, which I don't propose to go into. But dangerous … I shouldn't have said so. Except possibly, to himself."

Mrs. Allingham was baffled, but she wisely gave up. The meal continued in silence for a while, then Diana with an effort led the conversation on to less difficult ground.

But she was still anxious to present Simon to her mother-in-law in a less alarming aspect. So when she heard that he was giving an open lecture to the summer school she persuaded Mrs. Allingham to go with her to listen to it and afterwards meet the lecturer.

"You've hardly ever really spoken to him, have you?" she said. "He isn't always in a good mood. Sometimes he deliberately pretends to be stupid or childish, simply because he's feeling bored."

"As he would no doubt feel with me," said Mrs. Allingham, drily.

"No. Oh, I can't think why you have to be so prejudiced against him. I thought the whole point of your religion was goodwill towards everyone."

"*Our* religion, I hope," said Mrs. Allingham, flushing. "To recognise evil is not prejudice."

“I don’t understand you.”

Nevertheless Mrs. Allingham agreed to go to the lecture and in spite of her fixed estimate of Simon’s character and worth she very much enjoyed it. The subject was ‘biography in the twentieth century.’ Simon dealt accurately, wittily and fully with the modern development of the genre into something not far removed from fiction. Hence its popularity in the lending libraries, he explained, with well-chosen illustration and quoted, imagined dialogue. He referred to the great biographies of established literature, building up a comparison that was illuminating without being too destructive. Altogether he kept his audience completely absorbed and the applause at the end was enthusiastic.

Mrs. Allingham was impressed and said so.

“Now come and meet him,” Diana said. “Coffee for the V. I. P. s is in the Common Room.”

“Does that really include us?”

“It will, on this occasion.”

They found Simon closely surrounded by a group of those younger dons and their friends who were not already away on holiday. Among them, too, were the organisers of the summer school. The Press, to Simon’s regret, had been excluded from the Common Room, though present at the lecture. As a consequence of this he did not expect to have more than a brief mention in one or two educational papers. So far no one had suggested printing his lecture and the professor of history had said, rather waspishly, “I thought you covered the ground admirably, Fawcett. Particularly the twenties and thirties. I remember …” he named a similar treatise published some years before, and finished, “You must have come across it when you were preparing this.”

Simon agreed that he had come across it, that it was good, and had been helpful. It had, in fact, formed the base and skeleton of his own work, but he did not explain this near plagiarism. The professor moved away and Simon found it a relief to welcome Diana and that funny old religious maniac, William’s mother.

He accepted their congratulations as he accepted all praise, with humility but as of right. Mrs. Allingham looked less scared of him than usual, he thought, but Diana was in a state of

strange nervous excitement.

"We ought to tell Mr. Fawcett our news, Diana," said Mrs. Allingham, at length.

"News?" Simon looked from one to the other, noting Diana's instant angry flush.

"Of Penelope's engagement," the older woman went on.

"He's probably seen it already," Diana said, quickly, and added, "Penelope may have told him herself."

"I thought she was enduring the rigours of a sailing holiday with her father," said Simon, stiffly. He was unwilling to let Diana know that her news was a surprise to him, for this reversed the usual situation between them. "She is," Mrs. Allingham told him, expanding into a full account of the engagement, as she had learned it from Hubert Dane's sister.

"I must congratulate her," said Simon at the end, giving Mrs. Allingham his most open, most charming smile. "But it looks as if we should not see much more of her here at college."

He glanced about him, received a signal from across the room, took his leave politely and left Mrs. Allingham and Diana in a small knot of strangers, the latter furious, the former disturbed and feeling quite out of her depth. Readymade opinions, she realised, not for the first time, were liable to shocks when faced by facts. The impact of Simon's complex personality made her former views look thin and rather cheap. This produced in her a kind of shrinking fear of him she had not known before.

Simon left the college as early as he could. He took a bus part of the way home and walked the rest, thinking about Penelope and particularly considering the fact that he had altogether missed this news.

Penelope had not written to him to announce her engagement. He was sorry about this. He was very fond of her, he told himself, ready to share her present joy. He felt unjustly excluded and this made him very sad. It was the old, old story. Life could be such fun – and such hell. People would concentrate on the hell, which they insisted upon building for themselves, instead of upon the fun, where everyone could be friendly and happy and fulfil themselves, as he did with Diana, when she was in a good mood. Which was not always the case, though what was biting her today he could not imagine.

He sighed deeply as he walked along. This fearful possessive

instinct in women. He always came up against it. Why could they not enjoy him as he enjoyed them, without wanting to own him? This was a normal masculine reaction in himself, wasn't it? He smiled a little and found himself murmuring, aloud "… anything in the world I wanted to be. But better to stand aside and watch. One of the best brains … original mind …"

People here and there turned their heads as he passed. He gave them his boyish smile and saw their faces clear as they smiled back.

Penelope. Pretty charming Penelope. Giving her broken heart to a boy she scarcely knew. Or was it mended? He devoutly hoped so.

By the time he reached his flat he had decided that Penelope was cured, that she was going to be gloriously happy – for a time – because no happiness lasted very long and marital happiness perhaps ten years or less – but happy now at any rate and he himself was absolved.

He wanted to tell George of this satisfactory outcome, but remembered as soon as the telephone began to ring in his friend's house that George was out of the country. Disappointed and now vaguely upset he went over to the fireplace to look at himself in the wall mirror that hung above it.

Gradually, as his eyes lingered on the image there, his inner disturbance died away and an ineffable calm took its place. Here was certainty in a world of doubt, truth in a world of lies, the supreme power of acceptance in a world of rejection. At the first and last shrine of his separate existence Simon worshipped, wrapping about him in a tight confining robe the swaddling clothes of his infancy.

Chapter Five

A week later the Danes were back in London. Penelope found a great pile of congratulatory letters waiting for her and was no sooner in the house than the telephone kept her running to answer it, distracting her from her unpacking and all the rest of the process of settling down again after a month's holiday.

Not that she felt at all inclined to settle. Her engagement, occurring as it did, one moonlit night in a small harbour opposite the Porquerelle islands, had seemed a return to life, a blessed release from the strain and misery of the early summer. But now her mood changed. Away from the small, shut-off community on board the yacht she realised that apart from sailing she knew nothing very much of Richard's interests, habits, opinions or normal life ashore. He was a young, aspiring and not unsuccessful barrister. His parents were little more than acquaintances of her father. She found herself thinking tenderly of Richard in dirty jeans and a very heavy Swedish sweater and the next minute being almost afraid to meet him in ordinary clothes.

But a meeting and an uncomfortably formal one at that was to take place the next day. The Carringtons had asked her father and herself to dinner. Richard's married sister and her husband were to be present. In fact she was to be exhibited to the Carringtons and the engagement celebrated, signed, sealed and delivered. She thought of this with a feeling of revulsion she struggled to disperse.

One of the many telephone calls came from Diana. What splendid news, Diana said, in a voice that sounded warm and sincere. How pleased Hubert would be. The Carringtons were delightful people. William came across them occasionally: she had once been to a party at their house.

Penelope let her run on. It was obvious that Diana hardly knew the Carringtons at all, but what did that matter?

"When are we going to see you – and the ring?" Diana asked.

"I don't know. Richard's doing something about the ring today. We only got back yesterday evening. Daddy and I are

going to dinner there – to the parents' house, I mean – tomorrow. I'm to have the ring, then."

How like Hubert, Diana thought. Everything had to be formal, everything must be buttoned up and made fast. Would Penelope stand for that?

"How exciting," Diana answered. "It'll be a splendid dinner, I expect. The Carringtons have a lovely house. Why don't you and Hubert call in here on your way? It will, literally be on your way, won't it? Have a drink with us to fortify you for the ordeal. Not that I think you'll find it that."

"It's certainly an idea," Penelope answered. "I know I shall need propping up."

"Nonsense. But we'll expect you about half-past six. That do?"

"If I can persuade Daddy to play."

"He must be eating out of your hand at the moment."

Penelope's curt goodbye and the end of the call made Diana regret her last remark, which on thinking it over she decided had been far too near the bone, not at all tactful, nor in that good taste which she always sought to cultivate. However, it was likely that Penny and Hubert would turn up, so she announced their coming to William and his mother that evening.

"Oh," said William and fell silent.

"What's the matter?"

"Only John's back, too. From Gib. Three weeks leave and then posted to H.M.S. *Excellent*."

"What ship is that?" asked Mrs. Allingham.

"It isn't. It's a shore establishment at Portsmouth."

"Does this mean you've asked John here?" Diana said, seeing that William's sudden gloom was not relieved.

"Afraid so. He'd heard or read about Penny's engagement. He didn't want to ring her up until he knew a bit more about it. I don't know that he wants to ring her up at all, poor chap. He's taking it very hard."

"So you've asked him to come here tomorrow evening and unless I put one side or the other off he'll actually meet Penny and that'll be most awkward."

"It'll be more than awkward," said William. "It will grieve Penny and be hell for John."

"It will get them both over a painful necessity in the quickest possible way," said Mrs. Allingham, briskly. "I disapprove of this

modern wish to spare people every kind of necessary suffering."

"Is suffering ever necessary?" asked Diana.

"Of course it is. As a doctor's wife you should know that. And salutary, too. And a formal occasion – I'm thinking particularly of weddings and funerals – is an excellent way of giving dignity, relief and a ritual outlet for deep feelings, aside altogether from the support and consolation of religion."

"I'm not considering Penny's engagement as a sort of funeral," said Diana, angrily.

"We were talking about John's hopes, which must now die," said William, as he saw his mother's answering flush.

The two women fell silent, with the problem quite unresolved. In fact Diana determined to do nothing about it. William had invited his nephew, she had invited the Danes. Let what would happen. No lasting damage could occur to anyone.

John arrived at six, to find his great-aunt sitting by the open windows, reading. She put her book down when he came in and he stooped to kiss her.

"Haven't seen you for ages," he said, smiling, for he was fond of her in spite of her foibles, by which he meant her religious predilections. "How are the drains?"

"Being taken past my gate, but not yet into the cottage, I'm afraid."

"No chance of getting out of this oven yet, then?"

"No. The children are very good to me. I don't go out much. Walking on pavements makes my ankles swell. Just the heat. William says my heart's all right."

"Good."

He turned away from her, looking about the room.

"Diana came in late," Mrs. Allingham said, calmly. "She's changing. She won't be long."

He nodded, turning away to look at an unfamiliar print on the wall.

"Penny's engagement must be a sad blow to you, my dear," the old woman said, in the same calm voice. "I think you ought to know she and her father are coming in for a few minutes this evening."

"Here?" His voice was strained.

"I'm afraid so. Diana arranged it before she knew you were back." She paused and then said, softly, "I'm very sorry for your

disappointment. Perhaps she was really too young when you first met her."

He nodded, without looking round.

"Her mother had just died. She was staying with Bill and Di. She was sixteen and all to pieces. Her first holidays from school with no mother to gossip to about the term and everything. A poor little white frozen face. I remember the enormous relief the first time I made her laugh."

"And then you fell in love with her?"

"I suppose it does date from that time – from the start. We have most things in common. Had – I mean."

Presently Diana came in with a tray of glasses and bottles. John took it from her and when he had laid it down went over to kiss her cheek.

"You look wonderful, Di," he said, meaning it. Her figure was perfect still, her dress charming, her face unlined and just now in the anticipation of the party, lit with pleasure.

"Flatterer," she said. "You look pretty good yourself. I hope you'll be around for a bit." She glanced across at Mrs. Allingham. "Does he know?"

"Yes, he knows," the old woman said, quietly.

The bell rang, checking her next words. But Diana saw in John's face that he was well prepared.

"That's probably …" she was beginning, but he stopped her.

"Let me answer it," he said, firmly, as he walked out of the room.

"Poor John," Diana sighed. "Some girls have no sense."

Mrs. Allingham said nothing.

If Penelope was embarrassed by John's presence she did not show it. She came into the drawing room pulling off her silk evening coat as she did so. The embroidered top of her short evening dress glittered in the last slanting sunlight as she crossed the floor to greet Mrs. Allingham. John thought bitterly that he had never seen her look so beautiful. He turned away to help Diana distribute drinks.

William arrived shortly afterwards and though the talk was general at first, by degrees the two younger members found themselves excluded and brought together. They struggled for a few minutes with trivialities but at last their eyes met and seeing the pain in his Penelope's own filled with tears.

"I'm sorry," she said, stupidly.

"To hell with that. You've every right … It just came as a bit of a shock after all those letters you wrote me about noble renunciation and so on."

"I had to."

"Write me full accounts or fancy yourself in love again?"

She was roused by this.

"It isn't fancy. I'm sorry I did write so often."

"Hard to break the schoolgirl habit, I suppose?" he said, savagely. "As the old lady said just now, we knew each other too soon."

"Have you been discussing me with *her*?"

"Why not? Everyone gets discussed when matrimony is in the offing. You wait till the college gossip comes round to you. That'll be quite something."

They were so intent on the explosive situation between them that neither heard the drawing room door open. In any case they had their backs to it. But Diana heard and looked across Hubert Dane's shoulder and saw Simon, framed by the open doorway, his head up, his dark eyes eager, arrogant, compelling, waiting for the company to turn and acknowledge him.

She stared back, both furious and terrified. It was the last thing she had expected; it was unbelievably reckless. It was a trap with no way out.

Catching her eye, Simon smiled. Then his light clear voice struck into every heart.

"To Penelope! Long life and happiness!"

The girl gave a frightened cry and her hand, which had been conveying her glass to her lips, shook violently, so that the champagne in it splashed the front of her dress.

All eyes turned to her. John was down on his knees, mopping vigorously at the silk with his handkerchief. Penelope stood rigid, with a white face and shaking hands. Simon was beside her in an instant, taking the glass, apologising profusely, solicitous, half-laughing.

"I startled you! How dreadful! No idea you hadn't seen me – So terribly sorry …"

William recovered his presence of mind. He took Penelope's glass from Simon, substituting a filled one for the unexpected guest.

“You surprised us all,” he said, harshly. “I’m afraid Diana didn’t warn me you were coming.”

Simon thanked him for the drink and turned back to Penelope.

“May I drink your health properly now?” he asked.

She was standing half turned away from him and close to John, who had risen, having done as much as he could for her spoiled dress.

“None of us has drunk that toast yet,” William said, in the same harsh voice. He raised his glass.

“Penelope!” he said. “Long life, health and happiness!”

They all drank. Mrs. Allingham held out her glass.

“Mr. Fawcett,” she said. “Will you please put down my glass for me.”

Simon turned to her at once, did as she asked and continued to stand over her, asking polite questions about her cottage and its improvements. He seemed to be very fully informed, she thought.

Meanwhile Hubert, determined to ignore the gatecrasher, whom he was sure had no right to be there, had carried off William into the study next door, meaning to follow his original programme of showing his friend the coloured slides of the cruise.

Penelope saw him go and tried to stop him. She caught him up at the door of the room.

“We haven’t time now,” she urged. “We ought to go.”

Her sole desire was for immediate flight. But her father was obstinate.

“It won’t take long,” he said. “You can come and help us get ready if you like.”

She went back to tell John. Together they left the room.

“What is happening?” asked Mrs. Allingham. “Is the party over?”

She was bewildered by Simon’s unexpected presence and confused by his manner to her, which was not without charm and a kind of innocence for which she was totally unprepared.

“They have gone to look at slides,” Diana said, joining them. “Hubert is a fanatical photographer and William has a projector. Hubert will have been developing the beastly things ever since he got back and now must inflict the result on us all. The pictures are always the same, too. Boats and waves and

harbours."

"I hate waves," said Simon.

Mrs. Allingham got up.

"I think I'd like to see them," she said. "There won't be much time. They must be getting on in a few minutes."

Diana watched her go.

"She said that on purpose," said Simon. "They're all closing round Penny. It's amusing, isn't it?"

Diana did not think so.

"Why did you come?" she asked. "It's madness."

"Surely not so serious as that? Actually I forgot there was a party."

"But I warned you, specially. Anyway, it was a hopeless time to come. And just to walk in by the front door …"

"How else should I have arrived? Through the window? Down the chimney?"

"Don't be an idiot!"

His eyes flamed suddenly.

"Be careful! I cannot be called names!" The flame died, replaced by simple mischief. "I had my key."

"Exactly. D'you think William won't realise that? I ought never to have let you have one. But I thought it would attract less attention – be quieter than the bell ringing when *she* was in her room, resting. I must have been mad!"

He shrugged. He was not interested in her fears.

"Why did you come?" Diana went on, growing more angry still. "What possessed you to see her again now? Are you jealous because she's engaged to someone else? Can't you let her go, even now?"

He stared at her, coldly.

"How vulgar you can be when you're angry," he told her. "Your face is quite different. Ugly, hard, mean. Why do you spoil yourself so often?"

"Go away!" she said, in a low furious voice. "Go away at once. You should never have come!"

She went quickly past him out of the room, leaving the door open for his own departure. He heard her open the study door and the surge of voices from within. Then the door was shut.

When Simon found he was alone he moved slowly to the window and stood there, looking out. He felt sad. Not on his

own account, for he was not greatly touched by the rebuff he had suffered. No, his sorrow was all for the poor confused beings he had found in this room. Diana, with her ungovernable passion for him and her insensate jealousy. Dull William and duller Hubert. That stiff young man in the Navy. Poor old Mrs. Allingham, who thought he was the devil incarnate but dared not denounce him except to God on her knees. And Penny. Lovely, foolish, self-torturing Penny …

He heard her gasp in the room behind him and turned quickly.

"Diana said you'd gone," she whispered.

"Diana likes to give orders. I don't always obey them."

He went closer to her. Penelope did not move.

"Even *she* does not own me, you know," he said, gently.

His meaning was perfectly clear. Penelope closed her eyes. So Diana was the woman, the beloved mistress he worshipped. Diana, of all people! Middle-aged Diana! She must be years older than he was. No, perhaps not. She was supposed to be much younger than Bill. All the same –

"Look at me," Simon said.

She opened her eyes, but she dared not let him see the thoughts behind them and turned them down to the floor.

"Why are you still so unhappy?" he persisted. "I came here expecting to find you radiant. I wanted to share in the rejoicing. But here you are, pale and sad and with nothing to say to me."

She raised a shrinking glance to him.

"There is nothing to be said that you don't know," she managed to say. "Except that now I know that Diana …"

He came a step nearer to her.

"Diana finds fault too often," he complained. "I'm sick and tired of her continual nagging." He put his hands on her shoulders. "You don't find fault with me, do you? Poor child, you have never once complained. I owe you something for that."

His hands moved to enfold her, to draw her nearer still. "Is it a pretence, this engagement of yours? If it is, you will never be happy."

"I am happy now," she murmured, no longer afraid to look into his eyes. Her whole inner being lay at his feet as he kissed her.

But Simon, alert and wary, even as he accepted her and

acclaimed the renewal of his supremacy, heard the sound of the opening door and had already raised his head and dropped his hands when John appeared in the room.

Penelope no longer cared. She was flying above the world, wrapped in a shining cloud that hid everything but her own exultant self. She moved a little away from Simon, but said nothing.

"Mrs. Allingham wants her spectacles," John said. He understood perfectly what had happened. Simon had been quick, but John trained in observation, had been quicker. Simon's back had been towards him. He had seen Penelope's face.

Simon immediately joined in the search for the spectacles and it was he who found the grey leather case on the floor beside Mrs. Allingham's chair. But when he handed it to John the latter waved it back.

"Suppose you take them in to her," he said. "You haven't seen any of Hubert's pictures yet, have you?"

"Unfortunately I'm just leaving," said Simon, quietly, putting down the spectacle case on a small table. He turned to Penelope.

"I shall be at the Margot until about nine," he said and moving unhurried to the door went through it and was gone.

"Will *you* take them to her?" John said, pointing to the case.

Penelope seemed to return from a long way off.

"Terribly sorry," she said, her voice going up and down, quite out of control. "Where's my coat?"

She looked about her vaguely.

"I'm sure I took it off in here. Diana didn't take it – Where on earth?"

"Your coat is on the back of that chair in the corner," said John. "Why d'you want it this minute?"

"Because I'm just going, of course." She laughed; a wild, artificial mirth that closed John's mouth into a grim line.

"I'll tell your father. It's certainly time you were off. You're late already."

"No, John!" There was nothing artificial in her sudden panic. "No. I'm going by myself. You mustn't tell him! Not till I've gone."

"You can't *do* this!"

The enormity of her proposed action struck him for the first

time.

"I can and I will. I can't go on with it. I can't! You know why I can't!"

He still made a feeble effort to stop her, aware that he was only helping her resolve.

"But you can't possibly do it like this! It's outrageous!"

"The whole thing was outrageous from the start. Now it's over. If anyone wants to know, I shall be at the Margot until nine."

She snatched up her coat, struggled into it clumsily and clutching it round her made for the door. John stood, frozen, watching her go. When, a minute or two later, Mrs. Allingham came in she found him there. He had not moved.

He told her what had happened and she put her hands to her head in a gesture of despair.

"You were too late," she said.

"I was too late."

"We ought to have acted before."

"Perhaps."

They stared at each other.

"We are both guilty," said Mrs. Allingham in a voice of great distress. "There is a terrible risk."

He moved then.

"If I thought that …"

"No, John. You must do nothing. Nothing. He won't harm her."

"He'll break her heart all over again."

"She will free herself when she knows him better."

"I hope to God you're right."

William and Hubert came in, the latter fussing over the time.

"Come along, Penny! High time we were off. Where's that girl got to?"

It was Mrs. Allingham who found courage to speak.

"Penny has gone, Hubert. She told John she couldn't go on with it."

"*Gone?* What the devil d'you mean?"

"She has gone. It means that she has broken off her engagement."

"Walked out!" William could find no further words for his astonishment.

Diana, at the door, said in a raised voice, “What’s happened?”

“Penny’s gone,” John told her. “Cold feet. Sudden access of honesty. Take your choice.”

“Where’s Simon?”

“Oh, he left before she did.”

“You know that? You were here?”

“Yes, I was here. Fawcett went off on his own. Penny a bit later.”

There was a long silence, then William said to his friend, “After all, you did go on with those slides a bit too long. She wanted you to go earlier, didn’t she? Perhaps she got fed up and went ahead. You’d better get along to the Carringtons – as if you intended to arrive separately. She might be there already.”

All eyes turned to John.

“Did she say where she was going? Was she going to the Carringtons?”

John said nothing. After a few seconds Mrs. Allingham was heard to murmur, “May God have mercy on us all for what we have done here tonight.”

Chapter Six

For a week or two after her disastrous party Diana lived in a state of acute anxiety, jealousy, fear and rage, unrelieved by any news whatever of the couple who had brought this distress upon her. Common prudence forbade her to ask William if he had been in contact with his friend, though on the evening after the party the same prudence urged her to discuss Hubert's humiliation with her husband.

That conversation had not led very far. Neither William nor Mrs. Allingham wanted to revive the subject and as neither of them mentioned Penelope or Simon by name it was clear that any eagerness on her own part to lead their discussion in that direction would be risky, if not dangerous. As usual, Diana was baffled by her husband's attitude. How much did he know about her affair with Simon? How much did he suspect? She preferred to leave these questions unanswered.

But her personal curiosity grew as the days passed. Simon had not appeared. Knowing his usual disregard for other people's opinions and feelings, she was sure he was not kept away because he wanted to avoid meeting William or his mother. Had she offended him too much? Surely not! They had quarrelled before. At least, she had been angry with him and he had shut himself away from her, staring in another direction with the shutters down over his dark eyes. But it had never lasted for long. Well, it was not really long now. So why worry? She knew perfectly well the real grounds for her anxiety.

Penelope. Underhand, treacherous Penny. That poor young man she had let down. What an abominable, outrageous way she had treated him. Diana felt waves of righteous indignation flow over her when she thought of Richard's betrayal.

In the end her curiosity got the better of both her pride and her caution. She rang up Hubert's house and asked to speak to the girl. She was told, in a subdued female voice, that Miss Penelope was no longer living at home. She was staying with Miss Caroline Feathers at the latter's flat in West Kensington.

Diana immediately made up her mind to go there. Penny,

sharing a flat with a friend, was far more dangerous than before. She would have to be persuaded to go home. How was she living, anyway? Surely Hubert, in the circumstances, would not pay for this separate establishment?

She went to Caroline's flat quite early the next morning and was relieved to find Penny there, washing up the breakfast things. The Feathers girl was absent.

"Oh," said Penelope, with an attempt at a welcoming smile. "How did you know where I was?"

"Someone at your home gave me the address."

"I see. I suppose it couldn't be helped. I wanted to get my letters sent on."

She took Diana into the small sitting room of the flat where the crumpled bedclothes on the divan showed where she was sleeping.

"What does all this mean?" Diana asked, as lightly as she could. She was there to establish facts first: admonitions could be left until later.

"Well, I couldn't very well stay at home."

"Why not?"

Penelope looked at her and Diana's heart sank. The girl was already more mature, more self-confident. Diana shrank from the obvious answer.

"Actually, Carol asked me ages ago to share with her. She finds this place too expensive on her own. I didn't like to leave Daddy before, but now that he'd rather not have me at home …"

"Did he say that?"

"Well, naturally he was very upset. I don't blame him, really. It was all a mistake. Nobody's fault, I suppose."

"Nobody's fault!"

Again Penelope gave her that quiet, experienced look. Diana was exasperated.

"You behave as you did, in that absolutely scandalous manner and then say *nobody* was to blame?"

"I wouldn't expect you to understand," Penelope told her. "I'm sorry for you in a way. But you must have known it wouldn't last."

Simon had told her! Diana stared, her face whitening, all her worst fears justified. But she was damned if the girl should enjoy her triumph.

"Simon rather likes to boast, doesn't he? Rather an endearing little-boy habit. He didn't seem to me any different when I saw him – yesterday."

"You can't have seen him yesterday," said Penelope, calmly. "We were on the north downs near Dorking."

She walked away into the tiny kitchen to deposit the drying-up cloth that was still in her hand. When she came back she said, "I'm afraid I've got to go out, now. I'm doing a temporary job in a shop, collecting some money for my holiday."

"Where are you going?" Diana asked, struggling to keep herself from slapping the little bitch's face.

"The Arles festival. It's a combined party from the college."

"How d'you mean – combined?"

"Students and dons. Simon's coming …" She smiled, not maliciously, but in pure pleasure. "That's really why I'm going, of course."

"How *can* you? Your poor father …"

"Oh please!"

Penelope was losing her self-confidence at last. She burst out, "You've no right to come here! You of all people! It's – it's indecent! Of course I hate upsetting Daddy, but it's my life, not his! I've got to do what I think I must, haven't I? It's nobody's business except mine!"

"Not Richard's?"

There were tears in Penelope's eyes now.

"I've explained to him. He knew all along, really. He knows I'm sorry I let myself be carried away …"

"Simon has a lot to answer for!"

"Oh, don't be so stupid! Carried away by Richard, I meant."

Diana felt she would suffocate if she stayed any longer in that room. Suffocate or scream or strangle Penelope. She got up, her mouth set in a hard line.

"I think you must be out of your mind," she said, in a small tight voice. "I know Simon far better than you ever will. There is no happiness before you now. That I can promise you."

"Thanks a lot," said Penelope, under her breath. She was not afraid and she hoped that Diana understood this fact.

That evening Diana told William about her visit to the girl. At first he said nothing, but when she described Penelope's coming holiday in France, he looked up quickly.

"So that was what Hubert meant," he said.

"Hubert?"

"I had lunch with him today. I've seen him several times in the last week or two. He's taken this business of Penny very badly. Wanted to throw her over completely at first, in the bad old Victorian manner. 'Never darken my doors again' sort of thing. I got him out of that. Made him continue her allowance. He's been giving her a personal allowance, clothes and so on, besides the housekeeping money. She's quite comfortable with the Feathers girl, isn't she?"

"If you think sleeping on a divan in the sitting room of a minute two-roomed flat made out of one large room of an old house is comfort, I suppose she is. They have a sort of glorified cupboard of a kitchen and share a bathroom with two other so-called flats in the same house."

"Lots of girls live like that."

"But haven't had Penny's earlier surroundings. Perhaps she'll get tired of it."

"And perhaps she won't. She has some sort of job, Hubert says."

"In a shop. To collect money for the holiday with Simon. Or is it the honeymoon?"

"You're very bitter."

"Am I? You don't seem to care at all. I thought Hubert was your friend."

"He is. But I've never approved of the way he's treated Penny since her mother died. Expected too much of her and neglected her at the same time. She was bound to break out. Times have changed."

"You sound as if you *approved* of her present behaviour."

"I don't altogether disapprove."

He looked at her so fixedly that she was forced to meet his gaze and felt her cheeks redden. Once again they were on the brink of a show down, William thought, wondering if he dared push it to a conclusion. But now it was Diana who recoiled, breaking off the conversation altogether and hurrying from the room upon an invented errand. William sighed. He could see no end to the recurring embarrassment, unless, for some reason, Simon were forced to take himself somewhere else.

But that would mean a genuine loss to the college. Did he

really set this higher than the loss of his wife, he wondered ruefully. And then he asked himself if he had ever really held her since the first few years of their marriage. And asked himself, too, how much he now felt her loss: when he was able to put her totally from his mind for the whole of his happy working day.

At the next opportunity of speaking alone to his mother, William asked her if Diana had given her the recent news of Penelope.

"No," Mrs. Allingham answered. "But then Diana doesn't often confide in me."

"This isn't exactly a confidence, merely a report."

"You know perfectly well what I mean."

"I do indeed and I'm sorry for it. I hoped you two were getting to know each other better."

"We get on with each other very well," she told him, "which is perhaps a better thing on the whole."

He was silent at that and Mrs. Allingham went on, quietly, "Tell me the news about Penny."

He did so, relating both what Hubert had told him and what Diana had learned during her visit to the girl. Mrs. Allingham took it quietly, sighing a little.

Then she asked, "Was Diana very upset?"

"I'm afraid so. She has a good deal of social sense. She is more conventional than I am, I think."

"Hubert is more conventional than either of you. He must have had a horrible time at the Carringtons."

"He did. At first they waited for Penny. Then Richard began to panic about a possible accident and insisted on ringing up Hubert's house and then the police and the hospitals. Then the Carringtons said they had better dine while they waited for news. Hubert thinks they had already begun to suspect the truth. They had a miserable meal and then Richard was called to the phone. It was Penny, to say she wasn't coming and would write and was going to stay at Caroline's and please apologise to everyone, including her father."

"Insolence!" said Mrs. Allingham, profoundly shocked.

"Guts!" said William. "It can't have been easy to say, knowing how Penny hates hurting anyone's feelings. She could have let it go and left them all to guess."

"That would have been abominable."

William turned on her.

"What about you, Mother?" he asked. "You knew where she'd gone, didn't you?"

"No."

"You knew that John knew, then?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you make him say? You were in league together to keep it from Hubert, weren't you?"

She did not answer.

"Why? Won't you tell me why? D'you think I don't know why?"

"If you know, is there any point in our discussing it?"

He knew that there was none. His mother had acted for his sake, John for his own.

"I must tell John where she is," he said.

Mrs. Allingham answered, calmly, "I expect Penny has already told him. She always writes to him about everything that happens to her."

"She didn't write to him about her engagement. Is she likely to write about this … ?"

Mrs. Allingham sighed.

"I don't know. I feel I know very little about *this* – as you call it. Except that it will end, perhaps very soon, and then Penny will be really free at last."

"Why should it end? Are we sure it has even begun, except as a dream in Penny's mind?"

"The man is evil – an evil embodiment of self-love and pride – with a total disregard of all law, moral or spiritual, perhaps worldly, too. Evil always destroys itself and so comes to an end."

"That's a pretty sweeping over-simplification and takes no account of how much damage it does on the way. I can't think in terms of good and evil. Too sensational. Too vague. I have to look for detailed deficiency or some other kind of aberration. After all, Simon has done nothing, as far as we know, that is not common behaviour in these immoral days. I don't see that he can be attacked publicly on any grounds whatever. He is most discreet. This holiday, for instance. They are going in a party of at least twenty. I know he will see to it that any hint of scandal will appear as slander and be suppressed as such."

“He is evil,” repeated Mrs. Allingham. “You will be forced to acknowledge it in time.”

Hubert Dane, who visited her shortly after she had had this conversation with her son, needed no persuading to agree with her fully.

“William won’t have it,” she told him, sadly. “But doctors have no sense of sin, do they? Very little real moral sense at all. I don’t mean that William …”

“Of course you don’t. I know exactly what you mean. He probably thinks Fawcett’s endocrine mechanisms are wrong or diseased, which comes to the same thing, doesn’t it? Trust a specialist to find his own subject even against common sense. And in any case what difference does it make to the *effects*, whether the cause is illness or deliberate wickedness? Those who suffer from people like Fawcett don’t suffer less because a doctor says it’s due to disease.”

Mrs. Allingham nodded.

“In any case there is nothing we can do,” she said. “Only pray that Penny’s real goodness and – balance – will win in the end.”

Hubert’s face darkened.

“I’m not prepared to take that risk,” he said. “I’ve been making a few quiet inquiries about the man and the picture that emerges is very much darker than anything William led me to suspect.”

“How d’you mean?”

“Other students at the college. And women, – certainly one woman, outside it. I’ve known for some time about one dreadful case. A suicide, on his account, from a liner.”

Mrs. Allingham’s face contracted in pain.

“Couldn’t it have been an accident?”

“Unfortunately it could, except for one piece of evidence that can’t be released. There’d been a party on board and several passengers had seen – the victim, rather drunk, leaning on the rail. The cabin portholes were closed. No one saw it happen. Just vanished.”

“Wasn’t there an inquiry?”

“Of course. The shipping line was all for the accident theory. But the ship’s doctor said the poor creature was neurotic and suffering from insomnia. He knows more but won’t give it away.”

“Have you actually seen this ship’s doctor?”

“Oh, yes. I told you I mean to collect all the positive evidence I can.”

Mrs. Allingham began to understand the formidable enmity that possessed her son’s friend.

“Hubert, revenge is not for us,” she began, but he stopped her with a passionate gesture.

“I mean to have it,” he said, in a low voice. “I mean to break him.”

“What good will that do?” In her alarm Mrs. Allingham got up and moved across the room to lay her hand on Hubert’s shoulder. “An open scandal would do infinitely more harm than good to Penny. Mr. Fawcett may have caused the rupture with the Carringtons, but would Penny have been happy, really happy, with Richard? Wasn’t it better she should realise in time how little she cared for him?”

Hubert got up, shaking off the old woman’s restraining hand.

“She could have broken it off later and I’d have said nothing and done nothing. But this was an insult to us all, including Penny herself. Such arrogance is unforgivable and dangerous. I mean to break him. I shall stop at nothing. The man’s a killer. That poor drowned – person was murdered, as surely as if Fawcett himself dropped his victim over the rail. Killers deserve to die.”

“You are wrong,” Mrs. Allingham said, rallying. “You cannot speak of revenge as if it were justice. I do implore you, for all our sakes, to give up this dreadful hunt. You will hurt yourself, your own reputation and position, as much as his. He is very clever, you know, and very careful. Give it up, Hubert. The very thought of what you’re doing and what it may mean for William and Diana and Penny *terrifies* me!”

“You speak as if he were supernatural,” said Hubert, with an unpleasant sneer on his face. “I don’t agree. Criminal types are all the same, as I am in a position to know. They may have a certain low cunning but on the whole they are less intelligent and less efficient than the rest of us. In the end, tackled properly, they always give themselves away and then they can be caught. And broken.”

Mrs. Allingham said no more and presently Hubert left her. But her disquiet persisted. So much so that she reported the

conversation in full to William the same evening while Diana was in the kitchen. Later, when John came up from Portsmouth for the day, she repeated it to him. If she could not check Hubert's unchristian purpose, she felt, she could at least warn everyone concerned. Penny, she thought, would hear of it from John. Perhaps, soon, she might suggest that they had the girl to dinner. To encourage her to keep her former friends. As for Mr. Fawcett, himself, it did not occur to her to get in touch with *him*. She was still convinced that by God's ordinance evil destroys itself. She devoutly hoped for this consummation and naturally was not prepared to interfere with cosmic laws, or dispute the higher power.

Chapter Seven

Outwardly, the college expedition to the festival at Arles was a great success. The student members were for the most part enthusiastic, the older members of the party, lecturers and their friends, were appreciative, if not altogether of the fare provided, at least of the reduction in their expenses due to the collective nature of the enterprise.

Throughout the fortnight Simon moved among the group, entertaining, helping, stimulating. Each night he spent with Penelope.

This was not difficult, since the whole group was housed in the same hotel. Nevertheless the girl found it a considerable strain, where she had looked forward to two weeks of undisturbed bliss. At Caroline's flat she was sure of understanding and the consequent privacy. Here she was continually irked by a fear of betrayal, discovery, exposure. Not that the students would have thought anything at all of it, except perhaps surprise at her success where so many had suffered rebuff. It was the older members, loyal to the reputation of the college and aware of a more old-fashioned outlook among their contemporaries in France, who might make trouble for her on their return to England.

"We are not the only couple in the party," Simon told her, smiling at her anxiety. "I could name at least three others, but you probably know who they are, so I won't."

Penelope said nothing. This was so like Simon. He adored intrigue: he delighted in reducing all relationships, romantic, idyllic or simply innocent, to the same level of frank lust. Still enthralled, still loving him, she was too honest not to realise now his devastating limitations.

As the days passed she began to grow more and more uneasy. Her minor criticisms were growing, and to prove them false she began to make demands upon Simon's time and attention that he instantly repudiated. One afternoon she found that he had attached himself to a group other than hers and without telling her of his intention. She passed three hours in a state of

miserable, humiliating jealousy and when he came to her that night as usual, he found her still dressed, sitting by her window in an unlighted room, staring out into the night.

"I thought you weren't coming," was all she said.

"Why?"

"You didn't tell me you were going with Anthea's lot."

"Didn't I? Does it matter?"

His indifference goaded her into bitter complaint. At the end of it he said calmly, "You mustn't become greedy. Anyway, it isn't a bad thing to go on separate expeditions now and then. There's been a fair amount of talk. We can't afford to let it grow."

"But you could have *told* me. I won't be possessive or greedy, as you call it, but it hurt to think you didn't want to tell me, even a simple thing like that."

As he said nothing, she went on desperately, "I love you, Simon. Love means more than just – bed. It means trust and – sharing – and – and …"

His dark presence behind her, so still and silent, frightened her. The wall had gone up between them again, the wall that had crumbled at Diana's party, that she thought had disappeared for ever. Very deep in her mind she gave up the struggle. She suddenly understood that more than half her present unhappiness was sheer plain boredom. His unresponsiveness, his frequent withdrawal, especially his long silences when they were alone, were simply, crudely, boring.

Her mind was cleared but her heart struggled violently with the blasphemy.

"I love you, my darling," she repeated, piteously.

"Then stop being romantic and come to bed. For a modern girl you talk the most wonderful nonsense."

"I love you. But you don't love me."

"Don't I? Come to bed and I'll show you."

When he left her she was wholly his once more. But the voice of her mind, once heard, would never again be wholly stilled.

The party travelled back to England by train and boat, as it had gone out. It was a slightly diminished party, as several of the students decided to hitch-hike in France for a further week and one of the lecturers, who had brought his family with him, was staying on until the first week in September.

At Dover the party was reduced still further. There were still several weeks before the beginning of term, so most of the students were going to their own homes and these were not all in London. Penelope and Simon found themselves alone in a carriage of the boat train and at Victoria they left the platform well ahead of the remaining few who had kept together.

Penelope secured a taxi. Simon seemed to be taking very little interest in his surroundings. She gave the driver the address of the flat in Kilburn. Simon still took no notice. Only when they were carrying their suitcases up the two flights of dingy stairs to his door he said, smiling faintly, "You have never been to my flat before, have you?"

"You've never let me come here."

"It was a good rule. Safer all round."

"D'you want me to go away?"

"Soon. You might as well come in as you're here."

This was not very encouraging. Nor was the sight of the flat when Simon unlocked the door. The way led straight into a reasonably large sitting room, with two doors leading out of it at the opposite side. Evidently the building had been constructed to provide the maximum of tenants in the minimum of space, Penelope thought. She had noticed two numbered doors on each landing; two separate dwellings. And the stairs, with infrequent dim lights and no lift, went up and up.

The room smelled neglected and stuffy. While Penelope was putting down her suitcase near the door, Simon crossed the room quickly, opened one of the other doors, stood a moment, and then closing it again, moved to the window, pulled the top down, letting in a cold petrol-laden draught and drew the curtains.

Penelope straightened herself.

"It *would* be freezing – and raining! After all that glorious sun. Can I put the fire on?"

Simon had not moved from the window and did not answer. She looked on the mantelpiece for matches, noticing in the mirror above it how pale and worn she looked, her hair blown all over her forehead, her makeup practically gone.

"Have you got a match?"

As he still did not answer, she turned, shocked to see his face, whiter and more strained than her own. He was shivering.

"Darling! You're frozen! Haven't you got a match? I *must* get the fire going!"

He moved to help her, finding a taper behind a small flower jug on the mantelpiece and producing a lighter from his pocket.

"I hate bangs," he said, his teeth clicking together as he spoke.

She stooped to the fire, but there was no gas in the pipe.

"Shilling meter?" she asked, fumbling in her handbag for coins. "Bother these francs. I meant to put them away. Where is it? Kitchen? Which door?"

"Give me the shilling," he said, angrily. "Stay where you are."

She was more puzzled still by his manner, but he was obviously upset, even ill, she thought, excusing him to her heart. All the same, she *had* paid the taxi and now the meter. He could at least say –

He came in again, a little flushed now but speaking more normally.

"Try again," he said.

The fire lit, without a bang. Simon dropped into a chair beside it, holding out his shaking hands to the warmth that began to spread into the chill room.

Penelope sat back on her heels beside him, watching and pitying. He was a bad sailor as he had always told her. Going out the day had been fine and sunny and he was able to sit, very still, throughout an extremely smooth crossing and afterwards eat a hearty meal on the train in France. This afternoon had been very different. He had foregone lunch that day on the train to prepare for the crossing, which had been distinctly choppy. Penelope had never been sea-sick in her life, not even on her father's yacht. She had seen Simon, driven by rain, wind and spray, settle on an uncomfortable narrow bench just outside one of the big saloons. He was obviously controlling himself by sheer will-power. She dared not speak to him. Later, with one or two of her student friends, she had eaten a good meal in the almost deserted dining saloon of the ship.

So now, remembering their journey, she said, "You *must* have something to eat. You've had nothing since coffee and rolls this morning. It's after seven. Will there be any food in the flat? I suppose not. What can we do?"

"You'd better find a meal out or go home," he said, dully.

"I won't go home and leave you like this. You must have

something here, if it's only a tin."

She moved towards the door he had gone through to feed the meter, but he stopped her again.

"I won't have you messing about in my flat," he said, furiously. "You may think you own me, but you damned well don't."

"I only – Simon, you're ill! Isn't there any shop round here – I must get you …"

He pulled himself up in his chair with an effort.

"There's a funny little delicatessen place round the first corner to the right as you leave the block. It's open till eight, except on Thursdays. This isn't Thursday, is it?"

"No, it's Friday," she said, staring at him.

"See what you can find. There won't be much, but I don't want much after that appalling journey."

He dropped his head in his hands, leaning forward again towards the fire. Though Penelope wanted to take him in her arms and comfort him she thought better of it. What he needed was hot food inside him. She snatched up her handbag and went quickly out of the flat.

As soon as the door closed behind her Simon sat up, listening to the sound of her footsteps dying away on the stone stairs. When the sound stopped he called out, loudly, "You can come in now, Mrs. Morris. But turn the kitchen light on first."

Looking round he saw the light go on in the kitchen and smiled. The door opened slowly and a thin, slightly bent figure in a drab skirt and overall under a bright red overcoat moved reluctantly into the room.

"Think yer got second sight, do yet?" she said, trying to attack when she knew she was defeated.

"No. But you left the door open a fraction when you tried to close it after you heard my key in the lock. And you didn't put the light out quickly enough. I saw it when I got out of the taxi."

"We all know you're wonderful," she said, moving by slow steps towards the door.

Simon held out his hand.

"Give me the key," he said.

She clutched the pocket of her coat, giving away the key's whereabouts, but she continued towards the door.

"Take the key out of your pocket and give it to me," he

ordered.

Mrs. Morris hurried towards the door. But Simon was too quick for her. He bounded from his chair, leaped past her and was standing with his back to her escape and his hand held out when she checked herself, almost touching him.

"The key," he repeated, staring into her eyes.

Very slowly Mrs. Morris took it out and handed it to him. Then, looking this way and that she caught sight of the two suitcases near the door. Before Simon could stop her she was on her knees beside them, looking at the labels, reading the initials on Penelope's.

"That wouldn't be Miss Penelope Dane, now would it?" she said, standing up again, her face full of malice. "Daughter of Mr. Hubert Dane, Q. C.?"

"Will you go," he said, ignoring her question. "And remember this. From now on you will get the caretaker to let you in here when you come to clean for me and if I ever find you in my rooms again out of working hours I shall send for the police."

"Nark it!" Mrs. Morris said, roughly. "Call for the police indeed! You wouldn't dare to, *and* you know it. Police! You make me laugh. I bin ' ere to clean same as you asked me to. Waiting for me money and why shouldn't I? It's my right."

"Then why did you hide? Why go into the kitchen with the light off? Miss Dane would have found you there if I hadn't stopped her going in."

"Then for why did you stop 'er? Oh, you needn't answer."

"I don't intend to."

He took out his wallet and found a pound note.

"Two hours the day I left – after I'd gone. An hour and a half today. Seventeen and six. I want two and six change."

Mrs. Morris laughed, but she took his note, saying, as she did so, "You do, do you? Well, you can listen to me. *I* want thirty nickers. Fair price for keeping quiet about the new girl friend. There's two I know would pay more than that for the evidence I got now."

Simon's face darkened in anger, but he did not move.

"Very well. I shall simply deduct the half-crown from your next week's wages. You will come on Friday morning for two hours as usual."

"Thirty quid," Mrs. Morris said, on a rising note. "And cheap

at the price. I don't mind giving you till Saturday, seeing you're only just back. Considerate, that's me. Not like my old man. Catch 'im doing a kind act."

Something in Simon's face made the words fade on her lips. She pulled her coat together and went away.

After she had gone he stood looking at the door, cursing her in a whispered string of violent obscenity. Then, shivering again, though the room was now much warmer, he went back to his chair near the fire.

Almost at once the bell rang. Penelope was back with a brown paper carrier bag of provisions. Simon said nothing, simply let her in, shut the door behind her and returned to the fire.

"Your delicatessen shop was splendid," she said, gaily. "It had everything. Cold meats, salad, fruit, packet soup, cheese."

"Bread and cheese will do for me. I suppose they had bread?"

"Yes, bread. What d'you cook on? Gas or electricity?"

"I don't cook. There is a gas affair. No need for you to cook, either."

"I'm going to make some soup. The rest's cold."

"God damn you! Stop talking about food!"

She stared at him, more grieved than affronted, more puzzled than afraid. Though his words were violent, he had spoken them in a low voice, almost without expression. Leaving her parcels on the table she went to him and knelt at his side.

"Is anything wrong?" she asked, gently, wishing she did not feel the queer impatience with his moods that had grown on her in the last few days. "Isn't there anything I can do?"

He put out a hand to touch her neck, but drew back almost at once.

"You must put up with me, Penny," he said. "Don't try to work everything out in terms of common sense. Be content to feel."

"I do try." She did not at all understand what he wanted.

"One of the best brains …" he murmured, "… could take you as far – but always beset – so demanding – so greedy …"

"Darling," she tried again. "Where are you? Come back to me."

She was astonished by what she had just said, but she meant every word of it. His empty shell was before her, the blank eyes stared mournfully into her own.

While she struggled to find a way to him he was suddenly back, with an arm about her shoulders and a look almost of tenderness.

"You are kind," he murmured. "And patient. So much more patient than Diana. I think you might do me a great deal of good."

A little shiver of anticipation ran through her. Against all reason, all probability, all warnings, her deepest wish, to love and serve him always, rose again to the surface of her mind. She moved closer, looking up and waiting.

"There's something I want to ask you," he said, staring now into the distance above her head.

"Yes," The wish moved towards conviction, certainty.

"If you feel you can't, just say so and we'll say no more about it."

She nodded.

"Can you lend me thirty pounds?"

The blow to her heart made her stupid.

"Lend?" she said, thickly. *"Thirty pounds?"*

She met his eyes and recoiled from them. Quite plainly he knew she had expected an offer of marriage and he was taking a malicious pleasure in the anticlimax he had created. She felt a wave of sick faintness pass over her as reality, sad, sordid reality, closed down.

But she had not yet lost all wish to serve him. She still wanted to prove her love, for it had filled her life for nearly a year and she could not lightly abandon it.

She got to her feet, moving away from him in order to make some attempt to think clearly. Her father had never stopped her personal allowance, which was generously in tune with his prosperity. It was paid monthly into her bank account, so as this was the last day of August she could afford, with some economies in her own living, to give Simon what he asked.

She found a chair near the table, took her cheque book from her handbag.

"When can you let me have it back?" she asked, determined not to give away more than she had done already, though the dead weight of humiliating disappointment was crushing her. "They pay you at the beginning of term, don't they?"

He did not bother to answer this, nor did she insist upon an

answer. At the back of her mind she knew that this was a gift, not a loan. His pride would not allow him to owe her money, but a gift would turn from charity to a tribute. She was quite unprepared for the savagery of his next mortal assault upon her.

He took the cheque she brought to him where he still sat by the fire: looked first at it and then up at her.

"Now I know," he said, with bitterness, "what it feels like to be a paid man."

Penelope's hand flew up, but Simon was on his feet with a steely grip on her wrist before her instinctive move to strike him had even registered in her own mind. She tore her arm from his hold, stumbled back to her chair near the table and dropping her face into her hands broke into harsh sobbing.

"Why should you mind my poor little joke?" Simon asked and when she did not answer or move, repeated the question.

Penelope controlled herself at last, but could not look at him.

"It was not a joke," she said, in a low dead voice. "It was not funny." She went on, "Give me back that cheque, please."

"You're all alike," Simon complained, not angry, but exasperated. "So *serious*. So *tiresome*."

He put the cheque, which he still held, into his wallet and the wallet into his pocket.

"Very well," said Penelope, surprising herself by her own calmness. "I shall stop the cheque tomorrow, so you might just as well tear it up or give it back to me now."

"I will do neither," he said. "When you have stopped being so angry over nothing …"

"Nothing!" she cried, as her love entered its death agony. "You call it *nothing?*"

"You're all alike!" Simon repeated, passion in his voice now. "So greedy – so grasping! You are disappointed because I can't marry you. But I cannot be possessed by anyone – Send them all away – Cast them out – Flying about your head like vultures – like poison gas – like clouds of angry mosquitoes – Beat them off – Beat …"

She was on her feet, snatching up her handbag, hurrying into her coat, lifting her suitcase, dragging open the door. Fear drove her and total disillusionment and an overwhelming confusion, behind which pain raged and tore at her, filling her eyes with tears so that she could hardly see what she was doing. But she

escaped at last and closing the door behind her went clattering down the stairs, her heels sounding a hollow echo from the steps as she fled.

Simon made no attempt to stop her. When she had gone he went into his kitchen to find a bread knife and then to the table to gather up the food she had brought and take it back to the fire. Then he began to eat, hacking off pieces of bread and meat and stuffing them into his mouth, spreading butter thickly with the bread knife, crumbs and fragments falling all round him. He knew he was hungry; the food was good. He rejoiced that he was alone at last.

Poor Penny. What a silly child. But she would get over it. They all did –

They nearly all did – A fleeting shadow of pain passed across his face and was gone. How Diana would laugh at the joke that had so offended Penny. Diana loved to hear the details of his affair with Penny. She would laugh and then she would be kind.

He stuffed some more food into his mouth and sat munching it, staring at the red glow of the fire, while his whirling thoughts spiralled down into the mist where fantasy and fact joined hands in an intricate, delicate dance over which he presided, enshrined, participating, both the whole and the parts, the giver and the receiver, the worshipper and the worshipped.

Chapter Eight

The door bell, pressed with a firm, impatient finger, broke painfully through Simon's withdrawal. At first he simply ignored it, taking up an apple and biting into it as if there had been no insistent clamour to disturb him. But when the sound continued, without a break, he came to himself suddenly and furiously, leaping across the room to the door and flinging it open with a wide gesture.

John Allingham stood there.

"I want to talk to you," John said, quietly and politely, "May I come in?"

Simon moved away, biting again at his apple. He said, indistinctly, his mouth full, "I can't prevent you."

Then, swallowing quickly, he recovered his usual manner with strangers. "You must excuse the state of my room and my very primitive meal. I'm just back from France – only an hour or two ago. Famished. Horrible crossing. Such a bad sailor, but I never eat when I'm travelling, so I avoid being sea-sick, which would be too unbearable."

Disregarding all this and still not moving forward into the room, though Simon shut the door behind him, John said, with his back to it, "What have you done to Penny?"

"I *beg* your pardon?"

"What have you done to Penny?"

Simon went back to his chair by the fire, sat down, held out his hands to the warm glow. Without looking round at his visitor he said, with tolerance. " I do understand that you are an old friend of Penelope Dane, so I expect you feel you must keep an eye on her now that her father has –well, abdicated from his position of guardian."

He glanced round quickly as he finished and seeing that John's anger had made him speechless, went on, "Penelope was in our college party in France. A number of us travelled back together …"

"I know all that. Careful, reasonable cover. You needn't explain. I know Penny too well to need explanation from you

What did you do to her today?"

"Nothing."

"You brought her back here to your flat."

"We shared a taxi from Victoria. As it was such a cold wet evening she came in for a bit to warm up and have something to eat."

"You sent her out to get food for you and then in some way you hurt her so badly that she left at once."

Simon smiled gently.

"If Penelope has just given you an account of our last conversation why do you need to ask me? You won't believe my side of it, will you?"

This was said with considerable charm, which baffled John, making him angrier than ever.

"I went round to Caroline's flat because I knew Penny was due home today. I'm on twenty-four hours leave, as it happens. She wasn't there. Then she arrived. You know what sort of state she was in. We couldn't do anything with her."

"We?"

"Caroline and I. So I came here."

Simon got up and leaned against the end of the mantelpiece.

"Penelope is disappointed because I don't marry her," he said, gravely. "I have never deceived her. I have never implied that I might marry her. In fact, quite the opposite. I shall never marry. But she would not accept it. Women always despair if they can't get their own way. I repeat, I shall never marry. I could never live with anyone – continuously. Now do you understand?"

"I understand that no one is ever likely to want to live with *you* – continuously."

Simon made an impatient gesture with his hand.

"Why are you still so angry? You should be pleased that I don't marry her. Do you really mean you would like to see her married to me?"

"I would rather see her dead!" said John, speaking in the melodramatic fashion inseparable from strong, simple emotion.

Simon began to walk across the room. When he reached the table he put his apple core down on it carefully and looked round at John.

"Penelope ought to get married," he said, half kind, half contemptuous. "You ought to marry her yourself."

"You swine!"

At John's sudden violent movement towards him, Simon's control broke. All his hatred, his fear of this emotional involvement, his sick disgust at it, his horror of the ultimate, persecuting confinement, possessed him. He snatched up the bread knife and rushed at his enemy.

John met the onslaught coolly. Both inclination and training fitted him for the occasion. He rejoiced in it, because it broke down an impossible, bewildering situation into something he not only understood, but welcomed. Simon's attack was sudden, executed with surprising speed. But it was both unplanned and unskilful. John had little difficulty in side-stepping to avoid the downward stroke of the knife, at the same time gripping the arm that held it. Simon proved stronger than he expected, but was quite unpractised. After a short struggle the knife fell to the floor, John kicked it to the other end of the room and with a single, well-directed blow sent his enemy crashing to the floor.

"Might – have expected – dirty methods," he panted, looking down at Simon, who lay with his face hidden, perfectly still. "Why don't you get up? I shan't touch you again."

As the prone figure made no movement, the last of his anger ebbed away. He had not hit the chap hard. But you never knew – thin skulls –

"Look," he said, almost pleading. "You insulted *me*, so you had no excuse for picking up that knife. Anyway, I was coming to see you to warn you, as a matter of fact. D'you hear me? *Warn* you. Against Hubert Dane. He's out for your blood. I happen to know he's got his agents watching you for evidence that'll break you at the college. So you'd better look out. Oh, my God!" he said, as Simon still lay at his feet, motionless. "Can't you take in what I'm telling you and stop this bloody play-acting?"

If it *is* play-acting, he thought, shrinking from his fear. He knelt quickly, picked up the limp wrist nearest to him and felt for the pulse. It was full, regular, perfectly normal. He rolled Simon on to his back. There was no expression of any kind on the still face and the eyes were closed, but the breath went softly and regularly in and out.

"O. K.," John said, his fear changed, but undiminished. "O. K. But remember what I've told you. Hubert will break you if he can."

He waited a few seconds longer, then turned and went swiftly from the flat. There was something here that he did not understand, but it made his blood run cold.

As soon as the door closed behind John, Simon got slowly to his feet and moved unsteadily to the fireplace, where he stared long and anxiously at his image in the mirror.

The blow that felled him had caught him on the side of the head as he was ducking to avoid it. There was a tender lump there but it did not show through his hair. His face was untouched, except for a small red patch on the left temple where it had struck the floor. He felt this tenderly. No swelling yet, so perhaps it would not develop into a noticeable bruise. He had tried to break his fall with his hands, but not altogether successfully.

The young barbarian, with his vile, shocking temper! A warning! The fool! As if he did not know all that already.

He sent his gaze slowly round the shabby room, over the bookshelves with their rows of paper-backs and a few inherited leather and cloth bound classics: over the dingy chairs, also inherited, in loose covers dark with age and London dirt. He saw none of the squalor, but was proud of his possessions. He noticed the knife, lying beside one of the bookshelves.

It meant nothing to him, for the recent fight with John was quickly fading from his mind. But he picked up the knife and put it back on the table. Then, noticing his suitcase near the door he gathered it up and took it into his bedroom to unpack.

It was while he was doing this that the door bell rang again. Sweating slightly he went to answer it. Mrs. Morris slipped into the room before he could shut her out.

"Little me again!" she said, with a ghastly kind of gaiety. "Doll's bin in and took the rent money. 'E comes for it Monday so I'll 'ave to ask you to oblige."

"I told you I had nothing for you."

"Of all the obstinate …"

Simon took out his cheque book and wrote.

"You asked me for thirty pounds. I told you, which is perfectly true, that I have no English currency until I go to the bank tomorrow. But you can have this cheque. Blackmail, of course."

"Now don't you start calling names!"

"It is plain ordinary sordid blackmail and you know it. I shall

refuse to pay you another penny. If you attempt it I shall go to the police."

"We've 'eard that before. It won't do you no good."

"It'll do you harm, which will be the object of the exercise. I am no longer afraid of you – or of your employer."

"Wot d' yer mean – employer?"

"You know what I mean. I'm calling your bluff – both of you. Mr. Dane's reputation will not be enhanced by his dealings with you. If he throws mud at me I shall see he gets some back in his own face and I know how it will stick."

That silenced her for a bit. She took the cheque under the light to examine it closely.

"Wot am I supposed to do with this 'ere?" she asked.

"Anything you like. It's worth thirty pounds at your bank."

"Bank! I got no bank."

"Changing it is your own affair. Take it to your fence or whoever you deal with when you want to cash the things you steal."

"Now look 'ere!" Mrs. Morris was speechless with baffled rage. Hitherto she had prided herself on managing Mr. Fawcett. He hadn't liked it, but he'd paid up regularly when asked. Perhaps thirty was a bit steep but it looked like he'd be clearing out before long and make hay while the sun shines was always her motto. But a cheque – Might be dangerous. She handed it back to him.

"I don't know it's worth the paper it's wrote on, do I?" she said, trying to assume a reasonable tone. "Cash or nothing."

He tore the cheque across with fingers that had begun to tremble violently. He dropped the pieces on the floor between them.

"You had your chance. Now you've lost it," he said. "And your employment here. I refuse to have you in my flat again."

"Not before I 'as me lolly."

"I've paid for your work. Now go. *Go*, I tell you."

His voice was rising. He felt his mind begin to spin upwards, thoughts and visions crowding about it, ready to dart in and possess him. He struggled with the growing confusion, moving slowly towards Mrs. Morris to drive her away, out of his sight – away – away.

She snatched the torn pieces of the cheque from the floor and

retreated a step or two, but her greed still ruled her.

"No good you getting on your 'igh 'orse with me, mate," she said. "You got to pay so why make such a song and –"

The words choked in her throat as his hands closed about it. As his grip tightened his head went back and his voice in a high monotone rang through the room.

"They shall not prevail! The wolves in their packs closing in to kill! I will destroy them all. Men and wolves. Men that are wolves. Pursuing – jaws dripping – ravening – They shall not hurt me. Nor their jackals. Their …"

He was aware of a dead weight in his hands and found himself staring at a purple swollen face, a tongue stuck out at him between two rows of bulging teeth set askew. He snatched away his hands and Mrs. Morris fell heavily to the floor.

"No," Simon whispered, looking wildly round the room. "No! No!"

He looked down at his hands, then clasped them together and lifted them joined to beat at his forehead. The rolling mists that wrapped his thought cleared suddenly. At the end of a long black tunnel there was a tiny sunlit view of a river bank, a fishing rod stretched over the water, – a figure –

On the floor Mrs. Morris first twitched, then struggled violently, then drew a painful, gasping breath or two and collapsed again. Simon sat down at the table and watched her. The sight of the river at the end of the tunnel had frightened him. Watching Mrs. Morris's slow recovery extinguished the tunnel, which pleased him and also was interesting in itself.

He saw his torn cheque beside her, stooped to recover it and put the pieces in his pocket. She would not dare to ask for it again. Remembering Penelope's threat to stop her own cheque he took that one from his wallet. He would not need it now. Slowly he tore it in half and dropped the pieces in the waste-paper basket. Then he went back to his place at the table.

Mrs. Morris was now breathing fairly regularly. The purple colour had faded from her cheeks, though it hung on her lips still. Her mouth, which had been widely open, began to move and close and mumble sounds of distress and indignation.

At last her eyes opened, fixing upon Simon, still sitting in his chair, regarding her with cold interest.

She screamed then, with remarkable vigour, scrambling first

into a sitting position, then to her feet, where she stayed, swaying.

"Devil!" she gasped, hoarsely, and nearly fell against the door, but saved herself by gripping the handle. "Murdering devil! You'll pay for this! Mark my words, you'll …"

She choked, out of breath, clutching at her painful neck.

Simon rose, turning from her and lifting clasped hands above his head. His high voice again filled the room and this time Mrs. Morris heard the strange words.

"They shall not prevail! I will destroy them! The wolves shall be beaten back and the jackals destroyed – Destroyed!"

"Think you can get out of it putting on a mental act," panted Mrs. Morris, with venom. "It don't cut no ice with me. I come 'ere for my right and due payment as you very well know and I mean to 'ave it and more beside. Ten quid the assault'll cost you. I've bruises to witness to it. You owe me forty quid now, see?"

He made no answer, did not, in fact, appear to have heard her. Mrs. Morris was disconcerted. Her fear, overlaid for a few minutes by her persistent greed, returned in full force. She moved across the door, facing him, feeling behind her back for the handle. When she had it in her grasp she turned swiftly, pulled the door open and disappeared. As she shut it she saw that Simon was still motionless, his clasped hands raised above his head.

But when she had gone and he was at last alone his figure drooped, his hands fell to his sides. He lifted them once to look at them with horror.

"Not that way," his returning mind told him, with terror, with sorrow, "Never that way."

He twisted his hands together once more in an agony of doubt. Then went to the mirror to gaze at a haggard, distraught image he scarcely recognised as his.

"We are as we are made," he groaned, gripping the mantelpiece and leaning forward. As he stared and stared the harsh lines before him gradually softened, the yellow pallor gave place to a bronzed look of health. The dark eyes lost their hard glitter, softened, took on a doting tenderness. The mirrored lips parted in a gentle smile.

"We are as we are made," Simon murmured, lifting a hand to stroke the cheek in the glass.

PART TWO

The Trap is Sprung

Chapter One

Mrs. Morris's dead body was found ten days later, lying behind the dust-bins at the rear of the Kilburn flats.

The dustmen, on Monday morning, made this discovery. The dust-bins, one for each floor of the block of flats, stood in a row under a lean-to shelter at the far side of a small yard behind the building. A narrow passage from the road led into the yard, through a heavy door with barbed wire along the top to discourage inquisitive children and others. Another door from the yard led into the caretaker's ground-floor premises, which were more roomy and better maintained than those of the tenants. This was not surprising, because the caretaker was also employed as handyman about the place, with instructions to touch up and even re-decorate the various flats as required. The surplus paint and distemper which he ordered in lavish quantities for these projects, came in very handy for his own rooms.

Mrs. Morris was not visible from the yard door as the dustmen entered, whistling drearily to allay the tedium of a fresh week's work. There were two of them, an elderly stocky man, whose movements were purely mechanical and who wore a yellow cigarette end fastened to his lip, and a thin lad, with long matted hair and very tight jeans, whose restless eyes darted about the yard in a sort of aimless desperation.

It was he who found Mrs. Morris. He was heaving the last dustbin out of the corner, to sling it up on his back, when he stopped suddenly, his slack mouth falling a little further open. He stared round at the older man, who had come back as far as the yard door to see why the young fellow had not followed him out.

"There's a woman in be'ind," the youth said.

"Wod'yer mean – a woman?"

"Looks dead to me."

"Yer kidding."

The older man approached reluctantly. It was not the sort of joke he appreciated and the boy's face had a greenish look that

suggested it might not be a joke at all. When he had satisfied himself that this was the case, he told the young man to go out and fetch in the driver of the municipal refuse lorry while he himself stumped over to the caretaker's back door.

Mr. Wilson opened the door immediately. He had, in fact, been observing the unusual behaviour of the dustmen from his kitchen window. His wife went out early every day on a cleaning job at the local cinema, so he was used to tidying up his own kitchen before he attended to the staircase and small dark hall of the flats.

"What's up?" he asked, immediately. He hoped the dustmen had not found something valuable in the bins that he had overlooked when he emptied the tenants' various receptacles into them.

The dustman explained. Mr. Wilson gulped, but did his duty by going to look at the find. Then he both gulped and retched, but was able to mutter, "Morris. Mrs. Morris. Worked here."

"You know 'er then?" The older dustman spoke severely. The youth, too, who had returned, was eyeing Mr. Wilson with some interest. He'd never come across a murderer. Not unless you counted that Cyril – but it had come in manslaughter for him in the end, on account of the knife had slipped unintentional.

"I'll have to call the police," Mr. Wilson stammered, looking round at three accusing faces, for the driver had now joined the group at the dust-bin shelter and after peering at Mrs. Morris in her dark corner, had turned his back on her to stare in a hostile manner at the caretaker.

At the word 'police' the three men moved instinctively towards the door of the yard, but were checked by Mr. Wilson.

"You're material witnesses," he said, enjoying his sudden power to keep them. "You'll have to wait till they say you can go."

The dustmen exchanged glances, but saw the force of his words. While he was gone they lit cigarettes, even giving one to the boy, whose packet was empty and who had begun to shake all over, looking far from well.

"Shock," said the older man, pityingly. "Never seed a dead body afore, I suppose?"

The youth shook his head, drawing heavily on the cigarette.

"Better sit down," said the driver, kindly. He found a wooden

box in a corner of the yard and eased the boy on to it. Then he and the other man began to exchange their experiences of the Second World War, which related to a great many dead bodies and did nothing to revive their young colleague.

They had not got very far with their anecdotes when Mr. Wilson came out of the house again. At the same moment the Law, in the shape of a young constable, walked into the yard.

"What d'you think you chaps are doing?" he said. "You've got that lorry of yours in the middle of the road and you're obstructing the traffic. I've got a jam a hundred yards long outside. What's the big idea?"

"It's what they found," said Mr. Wilson. "I've just rung your station. Perhaps you'd like to take a look yourself."

The constable did so and did not like what he saw at all. But he pulled himself together and took the initiative. In a very few minutes he had taken down the names and addresses of the three municipal employees and a brief account of the find. Then he let them go. He already had the number of the refuse lorry.

He was in the road, still sorting out the traffic after the dustmen had gone when the police car arrived with a detective-inspector and a police doctor.

The doctor made a brief examination of Mrs. Morris without altering her position.

"Strangled," he said. "Manually, it looks like. Been dead, I should think, for over twenty-four hours. Probably more."

The inspector nodded and going into Mr. Wilson's flat held a brief conversation on the telephone with the divisional superintendent. He also ordered an ambulance and then went outside to speak to the young constable, who had disposed of the traffic jam by this time and was hovering nearby, hoping to justify his actions.

He was relieved to find himself commended.

"Did you tell those chaps to keep their mouths shut at present?"

The constable was dashed.

"No, sir. But they weren't the sort to take suggestions," he added.

"O. K." The inspector grinned. "Better stay around. The ambulance will fetch a crowd. With luck the Press won't be among them."

This wish was fulfilled. The unsensational sordid death did not find its way into the papers until Tuesday morning and then only as a brief paragraph on a back page. But it was murder. The pathologist in the mortuary confirmed the police doctor's speculative finding. The body was identified by relatives as well as by Mr. Wilson and the case, for a very good reason, was given to Chief-inspector Mont of Scotland Yard to untangle.

An unsensational, sordid death and a very obscure one. It did not take Mont long to discover from Mr. Wilson that Mrs. Morris was a regular cleaner at the flats. He learned who she worked for, how long and on what days of the week. He discovered that she was tolerated, but not liked, by the Wilsons, who never invited her into their own premises.

"Any particular reason for that?" asked Mont, eyeing Mr. Wilson severely. He knew several already, but was not prepared to disclose this.

"Not to speak ill of the dead," Mr. Wilson said, pompously, "we wanted to avoid any possible unpleasantness."

"Such as?"

"I'm sure you take my meaning," said Mr. Wilson.

The Chief-inspector did. The Wilsons seemed to think Mrs. Morris was light-fingered. It was a point he would have to go into with the tenants. But there was no reason to suspect the Wilsons of murder, except for the curious circumstance of the body being found in their yard.

"She was working here on Friday, was she?" he asked. "That was the last time you saw her?"

"Correct. But she was working on Saturday, so I believe. She does for Mr. Nelson on Saturday."

"Then you did see her *after* Friday?"

"No. Me and Mrs. Wilson was away all Saturday. At her mother's place in Ealing."

"When did you leave?"

"About nine. Mrs. Morris would be coming ten till twelve. To Mr. Nelson."

"I see. Then on Saturday there would be no one likely to notice anything that took place in the yard? I mean, your door is the only one to open into the yard, isn't it? You have a front door into the hall and the door into the yard. None of the other flats has access to the yard?"

"Only by the yard door off the road."

"Exactly."

Mr. Wilson received this conclusion with evident surprise. It had not occurred to him before. But he could not deny it.

"There's windows see out this side," he said.

"I know. But the yard's small and there's the roof of the shelter."

"Which would obscure a view of the inside?"

"Exactly. The angle is steep, there are blank walls on two sides. The roof over the dust-bins would render them invisible from higher up than ground level."

Mr. Wilson said, hesitatingly, "Is it your opinion, sir, that the – er – murder took place under the shelter, like?"

Chief-inspector Mont allowed himself a straight, keen look at the caretaker.

"Unless she was carried out of your back door, or round the front of the flats, I imagine that is what happened. But my guess is as good as yours, so far," he said. "Was the yard door locked on Saturday?"

"Not in the morning," said Mr. Wilson, regretfully. "On account of Miss Draper's bicycle. Fourth floor. Teacher. Rides it to work. Goes off on it most weekends. I unlock the yard door at eight, mornings. And bolt it last thing at night. Every day, including Sundays. Miss Draper never brings her bike in late."

"Thank you," said Mont and prepared to interview the tenants of the flats, particularly those who had employed Mrs. Morris regularly.

But here he found himself frustrated. As Mr. Wilson explained, most of them were out working during the day. Some of them provided Mrs. Morris with keys of their rooms, one or two had asked him to let her in and see that she went on time, and not before.

"How do they pay her, then?" asked Mont.

"When she comes Saturday morning," Mr. Wilson answered. "To Mr. Nelson. He likes to be there when she's working for him. He's a retired gentleman himself, but out a good deal. The others has her once each, weekdays, and Mr. Nelson on the Saturday. She calls at the others Saturday for her money before leaving. They stop home mostly, or if they're off for the weekend they gives the money to Mr. Nelson to pay her."

“Complicated,” said Mont. “But they seem to be a trusting lot. Except you and your wife,” he added, as an afterthought.

Mr. Wilson made no reply to this and after finding that only one of the tenants, an elderly woman, was at home, the Chief-inspector left, saying he would be back in the evening to interview all the tenants.

He returned to the Yard where he expected to find more useful information than the people at the flats were likely to provide.

For Mrs. Morris and her family were well-known there, which was the reason why Mont had been given his present assignment. She herself, though often suspected of collusion with the various delinquent members of her family, had never actually faced any charge. But Mr. Morris’s heavy features and thickset torso were represented in the records, together with his finger-prints and a considerable description of his persistent criminal activities. Mr. Morris had left the cooler only the Friday before and was known to have visited his home. The married daughter from Kentish Town, who had identified her mother’s body at the mortuary, had said so. He had been seen in the neighbourhood besides, though his younger sons and daughters denied his having spent Friday night at his home. They were almost certainly lying.

The fact remained that on Saturday evening and Sunday Mr. Morris was known to have made contact with some former friends in Bermondsey. He had been seen in several of his old haunts. He was not, apparently, short of money. But that could mean nothing at all: His lot were never short of money. They were too valuable to the top crooks who employed them.

On the other hand it could mean much. Mrs. Morris collected her wages on Saturday. She was always on bad terms with her husband. He knew where she worked. They could have quarrelled in the yard of the flats if she refused to hand over those wages. Morris’s temper had grown steadily worse over the years. He had let out at a prison officer during his last stretch, putting the poor screw in hospital for a week and himself in the punishment cells for a longer period. He had lost his remission for this episode. And he had now disappeared.

Chief-inspector Mont, usually very careful not to draw conclusions from insufficient evidence, nevertheless felt it safe

to do so now. Tentatively, of course. In the first place, the bulk of murders were domestic; men killed their wives or their wives' lovers; wives occasionally killed their husbands; parents killed their children; children their parents. Mrs. Morris was not a type to occasion sexual enmity. But money was a recurring problem in her family. The Morrises were known to fluctuate for no apparent reason between affluence and near penury. Their various legitimate occupations did not carry anything like top wages. Several of them, besides the father, had had convictions.

Secondly and significantly, no handbag had been found with Mrs. Morris, no purse of any description in the pockets of her clothing. The local inspector had noticed this fact in attempting to verify Mr. Wilson's identification. He had very properly taken steps to search the yard and the single dust-bin that was left there. Without result. The refuse department of the local authority was asked to impound the lorry concerned and preserve its contents. Already these were being sorted and examined. Chief-inspector Mont was disappointed in the results so far. A scarf that the woman might have worn on her head was set aside for him to look at, but her daughter said her mother never wore scarves on her head and she did not recognise the article.

So the Chief-inspector found himself baulked in his main line of inquiry. This did not disturb him. There were the tenants of the flats, after all. It was still less than twelve hours since the body was found. The story had not broken in the evening papers.

Mont looked at his watch. Those tenants should be in by now, or at any rate those who had gone straight back to the flats from their work. Taking a sergeant with him he drove to Kilburn.

Chapter Two

The Chief-inspector did not announce his arrival to the caretaker. He simply walked up the dingy stairs to the first floor and after reading the names printed on small cards in slots, rang the bell on the right hand side of the landing. The card there was yellow and stained with age; Mrs. Hyde was evidently an old inhabitant.

She opened the door after some delay occasioned, the Inspector decided, by her difficulty in walking rather than by a reluctance to answer the bell. When he explained who he was, she apologised immediately for keeping him waiting.

"Arthritis," she explained, limping across the room. "I don't get out much these days."

Mont expressed sympathy and explained his errand.

"Poor woman," Mrs. Hyde said, but without any apparent sorrow. "I suppose it was that brute of a husband of hers."

"Did she tell you about him?"

"Oh, constantly. I never knew quite what to believe, because she was not altogether reliable herself. I mean I think she exaggerated. Particularly when she wanted to get money out of me."

"In excess of her wages, you mean?"

"Yes." Mrs. Hyde looked thoughtful. The Chief-inspector waited.

"I never gave in to her," Mrs. Hyde said, "not even when she tried to apply pressure."

Mont was interested. The mild old woman with the painful hip was looking at him with quite a new expression. The soft lines of her ageing face had hardened and two steely eyes showed the power that still lived behind them.

"If you could give me some idea of what you mean by pressure," he said, carefully, "it might help us. We have a certain amount of information that leads in what I presume to be the same direction."

"It did not concern me personally," said Mrs. Hyde. "Only a member of my family. I told her if she ever made any such

suggestion to me again I would go to the police. She never did – to me."

"I can well believe that," said Mont, smiling.

"But she may have approached – others," Mrs. Hyde said, gently.

Was this a hint? Did it relate to the other inmates of the flats or to the relative she had so firmly shielded? Was it an old woman's imagining or deliberate malice? The Chief-inspector began to feel that he did not much like Mrs. Hyde.

"In spite of this sort of thing you continued to employ her?" he asked.

"Well, yes. She came to several of my neighbours. It was a convenience. We shared the insurance stamp and the travel. Not that she had to come from far away. She had another job quite close. I expect she collected double bus fares."

"Very possibly," Mont murmured.

"I had her for two hours on Tuesday mornings. These flats are very small. Just this living room, a small bedroom, kitchenette and bathroom. Originally built as offices, I believe, but turned into flats in the rush for accommodation after the war. I've been here ever since. I lost my own house and …"

"Did you pay her every Tuesday?" Mont asked, breaking through the rising tide of reminiscence.

"Naturally."

"I understand that a Mr. Nelson undertook to …"

"Oh, some of the others were always out when she did their rooms. I am tied by my hip. I seldom go out. Too painful and too tiring. No. I was always in when she came."

"Like Mr. Nelson?"

"Like Mr. Nelson."

Mont thanked her and left. Her opposite neighbour had nothing to contribute. A middle-aged bachelor clerk at a bank he was one of those who never saw Mrs. Morris and paid her through Mr. Nelson. He had no complaints to make about her work. He had never missed any of his possessions. Looking round his very poorly furnished room this did not surprise the Inspector. The Morrises were both knowledgeable and discriminating. They stole for profit, not for the hell of it.

Mont continued up the stairs. He found Mr. Nelson's card on the second floor, opposite that of a Mr. Fawcett. Deciding to

speak to Nelson later he rang the other bell but got no response. After all, he couldn't expect to find them all in, he decided, turning away. He went on up the stairs.

The third floor was totally unprofitable. Both tenants were business girls, who did their own cleaning. On the fourth floor there lived another clerk who also employed Mrs. Morris without seeing her at work and Miss Draper, the school teacher who kept her bicycle in the yard.

She was the only one so far who showed any feeling for the murdered woman, Mont decided. As soon as he explained who he was she said, "It's so horrible I can't bear to think about it and I can't stop. Poor thing, attacked in the yard, with no one to hear a cry for help."

"How d'you know all that? How d'you know there was no one to hear?"

Miss Draper was startled.

"Didn't it happen on Saturday? When the Wilsons were out? I thought that was why …"

She broke off, looking miserable and frightened.

"We are still trying to establish the time," Mont said. "Did you go into the yard yourself at any time on Saturday?"

"Yes. To get out my bicycle. I ride it to school and back every day."

"Is there school on Saturdays?"

Miss Draper blushed.

"Not official lessons. But we are trying to establish a small games club. One of the other teachers takes the boys and I take the girls. Netball. We've nearly got a full team now."

"So you took your bicycle out on Saturday morning. At the usual time? When would that be?"

"Oh, no. The usual time is eight fifteen. On Saturdays I don't start from here till nine. The children drift in any time after ten."

"And when did you bring it back – the bicycle?"

"About two in the afternoon." She blushed again. "I had lunch out – with the other teacher."

"Did you see anyone at all in the yard on Saturday?"

"No. The Wilsons were just going out by the front door when I came down. I don't know what time they came back."

"But the yard was unlocked?"

“Yes. They unlock it every morning, early. They shut it at night, though.”

“Aren’t you afraid your bike might be pinched?”

“Oh, no. I keep it in the Wilson’s coal shed. They let me have a duplicate key of the door.”

Mont decided that he now had the full description of Miss Draper’s habits in respect of her bicycle and that he had not so far progressed a fraction of an inch in his inquiries. He went down to the second floor and rang Mr. Nelson’s bell.

It was answered immediately. With disarming frankness Nelson said, “I was expecting you. Please come in,” and waved his hand in the direction of an empty armchair set ready on the hearthrug opposite his own. The Chief-inspector walked over to it and Sergeant Clay, ignored by Mr. Nelson, found himself a small upright chair near the door.

“So you were expecting me,” said Mont, pleasantly, when he had settled himself. “Any particular reason?”

“Only the one that must have struck you at once. That I was probably the last person to see her alive.” He struck a match to light a cigarette, offered the packet to the Inspector, who refused, and added in the same tone of voice, “Except the murderer, of course.”

“Of course,” echoed Mont.

He waited for a few seconds, considering carefully the man before him. Tall, thin, with a grey lined face and silver-grey hair, very light blue eyes, a mouth drawn down at the corners. A shabby dark grey suit, a crumpled shirt and stringy tie. Not a prosperous or even a clean appearance. But the man spoke in a quiet cultivated voice, without hesitation or embarrassment.

“Mrs. Morris worked for you as usual on Saturday, did she?” Mont asked.

“Yes.”

“And you paid her as usual?”

“I did. For myself and the other three. It used to be two, but Miss Draper goes out in the morning on Saturday now, so instead of coming down to my flat to pay Mrs. Morris herself at twelve noon, Miss Draper has been giving me the money for her, too.”

“So that would be four sums you gave her. Two hours each at … ?”

“Five bob an hour. Two pounds.”

“I wonder she thought it worth her while to work here. Six days a week, counting your opposite neighbour, Mr. Fawcett, and Mrs. Hyde, and only two hours each day, ten to twelve.”

Mr. Nelson took a little while to answer. Then he said, “She cleaned some offices just up the road from eight to ten or thereabouts, every day. It filled her morning to come here. I have no idea what she did with her afternoons.”

Mont was not prepared to make any suggestions. Instead he asked, “Did Mr. Fawcett get you to pay for him or did he pay her himself?”

“In term time he was at the college on Friday and paid through me on that day. In the vacations he was usually in when she came, unless he was on holiday away from the flat altogether. I don’t know what arrangement he made then. The caretaker let her in, I think. Or he may have given her a key.”

“Wouldn’t that be rather unusual?”

“Possibly. But Mr. Fawcett is an unusual man.”

“Are you never out when she comes?”

“No.” Mr. Nelson ground out the stub of his cigarette. “I am a retired man,” he finished. “My time is my own.”

“May I ask from what profession?”

“Business.”

Mont waited but Mr. Nelson did not elaborate. Instead he lit another cigarette. Bankruptcy, Mont speculated, or something worse?

“As far as you know, then, Mrs. Morris left these flats at twelve noon with wages amounting to two pounds in her handbag?”

It was at this moment that Mr. Nelson’s composure cracked most unexpectedly. His hands trembled, his voice rose as he exclaimed violently, “How do I know what money she had in her handbag? You don’t imagine I looked into it, do you? Or asked her? It was no business of mine what she chose to carry about with her!”

“I was not suggesting that it was,” said Mont, quietly. “I was not suggesting anything about the contents of her handbag, for the very good reason that we have not yet come across it.”

Mr. Nelson’s face flamed red with anger and then faded to an even more sickly grey than before.

“But it occurs to me that you may know precisely what you so unnecessarily denied,” went on Mont. “Look here, Mr. Nelson. Mrs. Morris was not entirely unknown to us. I’m sure you know as much about the criminal habits of her husband as Mrs. Hyde does, and probably the rest of you, including the Wilsons. I’m going to ask you a straight question which you need not answer. But it might help us materially if you will.”

“I need not answer any of your questions,” said Mr. Nelson, now thoroughly roused. “But you will not be put off, so say what you want to.”

“Was Mrs. Morris blackmailing you?”

“No.”

“Has she ever made any attempt to blackmail you?”

“No.”

“Yet you know, or think you know, that she had a considerable sum of money in her handbag when she left here on Saturday morning?”

“I have not said so.”

“You have implied it.”

“I’m not responsible for the interpretation you put on my words.”

“Very well. You realise you will be called to the inquest. If you really were the last person to see Mrs. Morris alive.”

“Except the murderer.”

Chief-inspector Mont was irritated but he saw that he would get nothing more from Nelson at this interview, though he had gathered one or two impressions that needed following up.

As he stepped out on to the landing, followed by Sergeant Clay, he found Simon Fawcett there in the act of unlocking his door.

“Mr. Fawcett?” he asked, stepping forward.

“That’s me. You’re the cops, aren’t you? Mrs. Hyde told me you were on the prowl. Come on in.”

The two police officers exchanged glances, but said nothing. Simon went ahead into his room, putting down the parcels he was carrying on the table and turning back to close the door behind the others.

“Been needling poor old Nelson, have you?” he asked, handing round a packet of cigarettes, which this time, feeling curiously relaxed, both the other men accepted. “He must have

been about the last to see Mrs. Morris, wasn't he?"

"He saw her leave his flat at twelve noon," said Mont, slowly. "Did you see her yourself that morning, sir?"

"No. Actually, I was away for the weekend. Shall we sit down?"

They settled themselves and Simon waited, turning a polite, interested face to the Chief-inspector.

"Did you leave here on the Friday or the Saturday?"

"Saturday. About half-past nine, I think it was. But I was downstairs before that. To tell the Wilsons I wouldn't be back till this morning."

"You saw the Wilsons? I understand they went out very early on Saturday. At nine, he told me."

Simon gave him his warm smile.

"Then it must have been nine when I went down. Miss Draper was on the stairs. She passed me. You'd better ask her. Or Mrs. Hyde. She was taking in her milk as I went up again. Either of them is better at knowing the exact time than I am."

"So you did not see Mrs. Morris at all on Saturday?"

"No."

"May I know where you spent the weekend?"

"Of course. Old friends in Sussex. Shall I give you their address?"

"Please."

This was all very straightforward, Mont decided. Not in the least helpful.

"Did you drive down to your friends in Sussex?"

Again Simon smiled broadly.

"Oh, no. I don't run to a car. I went by train from Victoria."

Deciding that he was getting too far away from the business in hand, Mont switched back quickly.

"Mrs. Morris used to work for you on Fridays, didn't she?" he asked.

"Yes. But I turned her off last Friday. I'm afraid I found her less than satisfactory."

"Oh. In what way?"

"Does it matter now the poor old girl has paid for it?"

"What d'you mean, paid for it?"

Simon, not at all put out, laughed deprecatingly.

"Not the right way to put it. But one can't help wondering."

"Wondering what?"

"Well, she had her peculiarities, you know. I don't want to be indiscreet, because I don't know what the others have told you."

"Meaning – who?"

Simon opened his fine eyes very wide.

"The other flats, of course. Mrs. Hyde …"

"Yes?"

"She had a spot of bother with the Morris," Simon said, slowly. "But Morris didn't get any change out of that old lady and I'm not surprised. Are you?"

"Did Mrs. Hyde confide in you?"

"People," said Simon, softly, "have an unfortunate habit of confiding in me."

Chief-inspector Mont felt an instant slight repulsion, but the feeling passed as quickly as it had come. "And Mr. Nelson?" he asked.

"Oh, Nelson thought she was pathological. But then he's a doctor. Was, I mean."

"What exactly do you mean, Mr. Fawcett?"

"I mean before he was struck off, or whatever they call it. Oh, didn't you know that? Now I really *have* dropped a clanger!"

Mont's feeling of repulsion came back and remained. His mouth tightened.

"Another confidence?" he asked, grimly.

"Why, no." Simon was all cheerful candour. "No. It was one time when I was starting a go of flu. I felt frightful and my temperature was soaring and I thought I might just die in my bed with no one knowing. So I crawled to the door and across the landing to ask Nelson to get hold of a doctor for me. I'm bad at arranging things and almost never ill, so I hadn't *got* a doctor, you see. Nelson took me back to bed and examined me straight away. He told me he'd been in general practice but was out of it and couldn't prescribe. But he gave me some stuff he'd got by him and said if it didn't work in a few hours' time he'd get me his own doctor. It did work, so that was that."

"Did he tell you why he'd been struck off?"

"Eventually. But you'll have to look that one up for yourself."

Simon was grinning at him cheerfully. Mont pulled himself together.

"You implied just now that Mrs. Morris had enemies."

“Did I?”

“You said she’d ‘paid for it.’ For what, Mr. Fawcett? Blackmail?”

“That was in my mind.”

“In relation to whom?”

“I’m afraid,” said Simon, gently, “you’ll have to do your own research, Inspector.”

“Was she blackmailing *you*?” Simon laughed.

“A university lecturer? That would be a very unprofitable business.”

“You have not answered my question.”

“The short answer is no. Like Mrs. Hyde I am not the sort of person who can be blackmailed.”

Which was a thoroughly ambiguous answer, Chief-inspector Mont decided, driving back to Scotland Yard.

Chapter Three

On Tuesday morning Mrs. Morris's handbag was brought into the nearest police station to the Kilburn flats by an estate agent's assistant.

This young man explained that he had been taking some prospective tenants into an empty house in the neighbourhood when he found the article lying just inside the front door. The house was an old-fashioned one which accounted for the fact that it had remained empty for a long time. It had a large letter box with a wide opening. The bag was not very big and seemed to be empty.

"Did you look inside it?" asked the officer on duty at the inquiries desk.

"Yes. Just a glance. The people I was showing round said it was an odd way of getting rid of an old bag and I'd better leave it where it was. But I didn't like to do that."

"Quite right."

"My boss said bring it along and there might be something in it for me. I shouldn't think so, myself. It can't have been lost. It must have been got rid of deliberately."

The officer made no reply to this, but merely asked the young man for his name and address, after which he went back to his office.

The bag appeared at first to be quite empty, but on shaking it upside down a small glass mirror fell out of its slot, followed by two scraps of paper that had been slipped in behind it. They were the two halves of a cheque for thirty pounds made out to Simon Fawcett and signed Penelope Dane.

The name of Fawcett rang a bell with the local detective-inspector who got in touch with Chief-inspector Mont. The bag, belatedly covered from further contaminating fingers, was sent at once to Scotland Yard and minutely examined. The results were valuable.

"The bag was Mrs. Morris's all right," Mont told Sergeant Clay, later. "Her daughter identifies it and we're lucky enough to have a couple of Morris's dabs on it. The man's, himself, I mean,

not hers."

"That settles it, then?" Clay asked. "Only got to pick him up now."

"I wonder," Mont answered.

They were standing in the kitchen of Mrs. Morris's house in Camden Town. Two of her sons, unemployed at the time, were lounging in the front room, smoking, turning their eyes to the tele from time to time, occasionally making signals to one another to indicate where the two rozzers had gone now. They were not seriously worried, but they resented the presence of the Law in the house. All the same, they were unusually subdued. Their mother's death had shaken them. Such an extreme of violence went outside the limits of their experience. The publicity was confusing, too: rather dangerous. The Press had been altogether too nosey. Mum could have turned them off if she hadn't got herself croaked. They resented her inability to preserve herself. They resented still more their father's brief visit on the Friday before it happened. The usual row. The usual scene. Then he'd taken himself off. They'd had to tell the cops he'd been, but they denied the row. Not that it'd do him much good. They didn't want to do him good. What'd he ever done for them?

Mont and Clay had been through the house carefully. They had discovered nothing to connect Mrs. Morris with any form of criminal activity, nor had they expected to do so. But they had found in a drawer in her bedroom a strange little collection of boxes and tubes all containing tablets and pills of a sedative nature, all on the Dangerous Drug Act list and all produced by the same firm of pharmaceutical manufacturers and labelled 'Sample'.

They lay now in a neat row on the kitchen table. Mont picked them up and looked at them one by one.

"Samples," he said, frowning. In his mind an idea began to take shape, but it was too vague to formulate. So he swept the boxes together and took them back to Whitehall.

Mrs. Morris's two sons watched the coppers go. Then, without speaking, they left the tele to continue to entertain an empty room while they moved into the kitchen to brew tea. Their unwelcome visitors had left them with very dry mouths indeed.

At Scotland Yard Mont asked for the Medical Directory of ten

years ago and afterwards rang up the firm of pharmaceutical chemists whose products lay before him on his desk.

"They do employ Nelson," he explained later to Clay. "He touts their stuff to the doctors. You get an occasional failed doctor in that racket," he added, seeing surprise in the sergeant's face. "Drunks, bankrupts and so on. They understand the jargon they have to spout. All this lot," he waved his hand over the little packets and tubes, "are samples, as you saw. He's supposed to show them to the clients and issue a few now and then to doctors who show interest. For all these he'd have to get the doctor's signature. So what easier than collecting signatures and issuing samples to himself?"

"And selling them on through Mrs. Morris at black-market prices to addicts?"

"Something of the sort. She'd get her cut, of course. Job for you here, Fred. Go round the doctors and find out how many samples they took and when."

"Which doctors? Did you get his beat?"

"No. I don't want to ditch him with his firm on what isn't more than a mere suspicion at the moment. You'll have to tail him for a bit and get an idea of the district he works. He hasn't got a car as far as I know or a bicycle and he doesn't leave London, so I'd guess he works entirely in the metropolis."

"That's a big help, that is. What gives if I do find the doctors? Not that any of them'll be in. Shouldn't think they'd remember whether they took samples or not, will they?"

"They'll remember if they tried them on their patients. Otherwise they'll still have them in their drug cupboards. I want to know why Mrs. Morris had this collection. It leads back to Nelson and it doesn't require much imagination to think it might be a motive for her murder."

"If she found it more profitable to blackmail him for pinching them on forged signatures rather than selling them on?"

"Something like that. But we've got to have evidence first that he did pinch them. That's your job."

"O. K., Chief."

When Clay had gone, Mont locked up the samples and then took another long and careful look at the torn cheque. The simplest approach would be to Simon Fawcett, seeing the cheque was made out to him. But the Inspector had found

Fawcett rather difficult to handle and besides there was every advantage in spreading the inquiry. So he rang up the bank named on the cheque and asked to speak to the manager. The latter was polite, but reserved.

"You have found a handbag …" he repeated.

"A handbag has been brought to us and in it there is a cheque drawn on your bank and signed with the name Penelope Dane. D-A-N-E. Can you tell me if you have an account in that name?"

"Well, yes, we have Miss Dane's account here."

"And can you tell me her address so that we can get in touch with her?"

"If you will write to her care of the bank we will forward your communication," said the manager, stiffly.

"This is urgent. If you don't want to give me her address can you tell me where else I can find her?"

A silence followed. At last the manager said, "She is a student of London University. I really can't say more than that."

Passing the buck, thought Mont, irritably. He thanked the bank manager, persuaded him to go one step further and give the name of Penelope's college, and then rang off.

A tiresome, time-wasting sequence followed. The university term had not yet begun. The bursar of the college passed Mont on to Hubert Dane, whose housekeeper referred him, with a curious frightened look in her eyes, to a Miss Caroline Feathers. The telephone directory gave him the address. Both girls were out. It was not until late that evening that he found Penelope at home.

Her surprise, he noted, was genuine and total. She was not aware of Mrs. Morris's death, which had not rated even a small paragraph in the newspaper he saw lying on her table. She was obviously speaking the truth when she explained, after hearing his description of the dead woman, that she had only seen her once.

"If it really was Mrs. Morris I passed on the stairs," she said.

"It would not be her usual time for visiting the flats?"

"I wouldn't know."

Mont wondered which of the tenants would know and put his money on Mr. Nelson.

"You are not conversant with the domestic arrangements there then?"

"I've only been there once," Penelope answered, pleased to find she was not blushing. "We'd – I mean, I'd – just got back from France."

She stared defiantly, furious with herself for the inexcusable slip.

"Had Mr. Fawcett been in France, too?" The Inspector's voice was quite non-committal.

"Yes. It was a college party. Twenty of us altogether."

"I see."

Mont held out to her the two pieces of the torn cheque.

"This has come into our possession. I wonder if you can confirm that you wrote it."

Penelope gasped. The shock was too great, bringing back as it did the whole dreadful evening she had tried so hard to wipe out of her memory. Her forehead felt cold: the room blurred and swung round. But she forced herself to continue sitting upright, to stare back at the Inspector who was regarding her with quiet concentration. When she felt strong enough to speak she said, slowly, "Yes, I wrote it. Where did you find it?"

Stupid Simon, she thought, to tear it up and throw it away in his room. For that was what he must have done. Only how had this detective got hold of the pieces? What had all his preliminary talk about Mrs. Morris to do with the cheque? She wished she had followed the case instead of being totally ignorant of it.

Chief-inspector Mont ignored her question. Instead he asked her when she had written it and what it represented.

"I wrote it that evening," she said. "Before I left Mr. Fawcett's flat to go home. It – it was my contribution to the expenses of our trip."

"You were paying for the holiday after it was over? Isn't it more usual on these occasions to pay in advance?"

"Well, yes," said Penelope. Inventing desperately as she went along she added, "But actually, I was rather hard up when the others paid in, because my allowance – my father gives me an allowance – it wasn't due till after – so Mr. Fawcett very kindly – anyway, I was paying back what I owed."

"But the cheque was never cashed," said Mont, patiently. "How do you account for that?"

Penelope was at the end of her endurance. She said, angrily,

“Why should I? I gave it to him. He could do what he liked with it, couldn’t he? I wasn’t there to see, was I?”

“I don’t know,” Mont told her, calmly. She had been white from shock, almost fainting, when she saw the cheque. Now she was flushed and angry. Obviously it had a far greater significance for her than a mere business transaction.

“Well, I wasn’t,” Penelope snapped. The man seemed to have swallowed all her lies. She felt much more confident. “You still haven’t told me where you found it.” she said.

“In Mrs. Morris’s handbag.”

“Mrs. Morris’s … ?” She gave a great sigh of relief. “Why didn’t you say so before? Now I see the connection. Mrs. Morris! She must have got the pieces out of the waste-paper basket in Simon’s room. He must have decided not to let me pay. I know he put my name down on the list before the trip as having paid for my expenses in advance. Because he’d put up the money for me, as I told you. He’s very good to the students you know.”

“So it appears.” Mont had noticed her use of Fawcett’s Christian name. It did not surprise him.

“It was naughty of him, though. I shan’t know what to do now.”

“I would prefer you to do nothing.”

She raised her eyebrows at him. Surely it was none of his business.

“I suppose I’ll have to insist on giving him another cheque,” she said, coldly, putting out a hand for the torn fragments.

But Chief-inspector Mont put them back in his wallet and returned it to his pocket, saying as he did so, “I’d like you to come down to the Yard tomorrow morning, Miss Dane, to sign a statement on the lines of what you’ve just told me. I’ll get it made out and you can alter anything in it then if you don’t agree with what I’ve put.”

He gave her a hard look as he spoke that made her curl up inwardly. She was not a good liar and she knew it. She was afraid he knew it, too.

As soon as Mont was out of the flat Penelope rang up Simon. She had neither seen nor spoken to him since the night of their return from France. But the urgency of her message took away any embarrassment she felt and Simon’s cool acceptance of her news made it easy for her to explain what had happened. In the

end he commended her inventiveness, agreed that he really had torn up the cheque and thrown it away and said, quite calmly, that no doubt Mrs. Morris had taken it with the intention of blackmailing him or her or both of them.

"Blackmail!" Penelope was horrified.

"Don't be so startled," Simon answered, laughing a little. "She can't do it now, can she?"

"Do you think the Inspector knows …"

"I think he knows a lot more about Mrs. M. than you or I are ever likely to," he answered, gently. "But I'll confirm all you told him and that should be that. How are you? I shall look forward to seeing you at the college when term begins. Ten days from now, isn't it?"

Penelope put back the receiver without answering. The nerve! The damned arrogant nerve of the man! And talking calmly like that about blackmail! She remembered stories Simon had told her, stories that had made her squirm a little, about depravities and crimes among people who were seldom suspected of them. She felt an icy chill gather about her heart. The stories must have been true if one of them had come close to her now. She decided to get hold of copies of the popular press of the last ten days and find out what had really happened to Mrs. Morris. After that, she would be able to decide if she need do any more to keep Simon and herself and her relations and friends from being drawn into this nightmare.

Chief-inspector Mont was quite sure when he left the Dane girl that her first action would be to get on the phone to Fawcett. The matter of the cheque puzzled him. Perhaps he should have invited the girl to make her statement at once while he himself went off to see Fawcett. Probably it had no special significance, but only gave further proof of Mrs. Morris's magpie disposition. But why then, the girl's extreme reaction? Was that something to do with Fawcett, or something to do with the murder? Fawcett, he decided. He drove on to the Kilburn flats because the only rational follow-up he could attempt was confirmation of her story and that, he believed, awaited him there.

He was right. But try as he would he could not make up his mind about the truth of it or otherwise. After all, what explanation could there be other than the one the girl had offered and with which Fawcett so blandly agreed? The two

were probably having an affair but that made no difference to the matter of the cheque, though it might explain her agitation. He could think of several simple, and one or two dubious, reasons why a young girl might give or lend thirty pounds to an older man, but did they operate in the world to which these two belonged? Surely not? Certainly he could think of no reason at all for the cheque having been destroyed, not presented to the bank, except that of generosity on Fawcett's part. Yet somehow, even on such a slight acquaintance as existed between them, he did not think Fawcett was a generous man. Glib, charming, friendly – up to a point. Kindly – again up to a point. But generous with money? You had only to look at his shabby room with its piles of books overflowing the inadequate bookcases to realise the man lived right up to his salary with nothing to spare for that sort of quixotic generosity. So what?

Simon lay back in his usual armchair watching with amusement the serious-faced policeman trying to sum him up. He felt relaxed, in charge of the situation. He remembered, thankfully, that he had collected the money himself from the students for the trip to France and had paid it over at the college to the official organiser in a lump sum, drawn on his own bank. So this conscientious chap would not be able to trace Penelope's real payment. The only records of that were in her bank account and his and the banks would not, and could not, be made to divulge them. When Mont began to ask him questions about himself he talked freely, happy in his sense of security.

"I come from the west country," he said. "The heart of England. Beltonston. In Shakespeare's county. The real English countryside; fields, hedgerows, gentle rivers; the part of England where all the best revolts and rebellions were cooked up. So near Wales – a safe bolt hole – I suppose."

He laughed, partly at his own lyrical fluency, chiefly at the respectful confusion he saw in Mont's face.

"You have always taught, sir, I take it?" the latter said, in the hope of getting something tangible beyond the name of a birthplace.

"Yes. I was at Oxford, a late entry after the war, and took a degree in history. Then Summermoor. Yorkshire grammar school."

"How long were you there?"

"Years! Seven, eight. You can work it out. I've been at the college six."

"When exactly were you at Oxford?"

"Let me see. I'm so bad at dates. Sounds ridiculous for an historian, doesn't it?"

They both laughed but Mont persisted.

"Well, then. Six and seven – I think it was seven – are thirteen and three – sixteen – and that takes us back to …"

"Nineteen forty-six," said Mont, promptly. "You went to Oxford in nineteen forty-six."

"I must have, mustn't I?"

"After the war?"

"Oh yes, it was after the war."

"What was your war service, sir?"

A cloud swept over Simon's face but it was gone directly. "None. I didn't pass the medical."

Mont was surprised.

"You look very fit now, sir, if I may say so."

"Asthma," Simon told him, his eyes, very dark now and curiously blank, searching the wall behind the Chief-inspector's head. "That was what our doctor put on the certificate he sent to the Board."

This curious account of his illness baffled Mont.

"But it *was* asthma, wasn't it?"

"Yes. Yes, of course."

"You were treated for it?"

"Very successfully. I was always well at Oxford, and nearly always since."

He smiled and Mont was reassured. Naturally Fawcett didn't like confessing to an illness that everyone knew was largely psychological. An illness that had allowed him to miss active service of any kind.

Simon smiled again.

"I'm sure I should have made a very bad soldier," he said.

This confirmed Mont's own conclusion about him.

"Were you treated at home or in hospital?" he asked, to complete his sources of further information, if such should be necessary.

"At home."

"And your doctor's name?"

“Now that,” Simon said, with another happy smile, “is more difficult. So long ago. Would it be Gordon? Yes, I think perhaps it would. But I so seldom see a doctor.”

“Yes, you told me that. You are lucky, aren’t you? I’ve always heard asthma is a chronic complaint, liable to come on again any time.”

“Then I’m *very* lucky, aren’t I?”

Impossible to spin out the interview any longer, Mont decided. The fellow seemed to be a confirmed bachelor, no close attachments, parents both dead, a few men friends, the college, the students, his work. One of these intellectuals. What did they call it? Ivory tower, wasn’t it? Shut themselves up with their books. Not likely to be much help over Mrs. Morris. Too vague. He’d never notice if she was robbing him under his very nose.

Then he remembered. Fawcett had dismissed the woman. He had said so. Also he had evaded giving any reason for it.

The Chief-inspector had risen from his chair as these thoughts passed quickly through his mind. Simon had risen, too, politely moving towards the door to open it for his visitor.

“By the way,” Mont said, turning as he passed through, “you never told me exactly why you stood off Mrs. Morris.”

“Didn’t I?” Simon, half a head shorter, lifted innocent eyes to his questioner. “She took things. Food, mostly. Books, sometimes. I can’t afford it. I told her so when I warned her. But it didn’t do any good. So last Friday – I made up my mind she must go.”

Mont nodded and went out and down the stairs. Simon waited until he heard him cross the hall and go out into the street. Then he turned back into his own room, his head high, a little smile of satisfaction on his lips.

Chapter Four

Penelope spent the next twenty four hours wondering what the police had asked Simon and what he had said to them. She had gone to Scotland Yard to make her statement, hoping the details were the same as those she had invented the night before. It was a blessing, she thought, that she had decided in the end not to stop the cheque. There had been no statement from her bank since her return from France, so she had not been aware that he had not cashed it. Her explanation of that was as good as any. It was a simple one. Simon had accepted it quite calmly. Did that mean it was really a safe explanation?

She tried to remember how the payments for the trip had been arranged. Certainly Simon had collected cheques from various students at their last meeting to arrange the details of the journey out. He had asked for cheques to be made out to him. Some of the students had given him cash. Presumably he had paid the organiser of their party in one cheque drawn on his own account. Would the police be able to go into all that? Would they be able to find out that she had really paid for her holiday before it began?

After she left the Yard her conscience began to nag her. She had committed perjury. She had signed a statement that was untrue from beginning to end. They could put her in prison for that, couldn't they? And apart from her own potential danger, wasn't it likely to involve her, if the truth came out, with this sordid murder? Which was the very thing she was struggling to avoid.

She walked up Whitehall, miserably going over again in her mind her brief warning telephone call to Simon. He had not seemed at all upset, but that was in keeping with his character as she knew it. He had always appeared curiously young and innocent over practical matters. It went strangely with his extreme sophistication in regard to people and their behaviour.

She found she did not want to pursue this thought. Quite suddenly and for the first time she found she was bored with the whole idea of Simon. Not bored mentally as she had known she

was in France. Bored emotionally, as well. Totally bored. The word came into her mind, in capital letters, repeating itself again and again. BORED. Simon bored her. She had suffered on his account as no one else had ever made her suffer in the whole course of her life. But the thing had evaporated. And now, quite suddenly, the idea of her love, that great passion, bored her.

She stood still when she reached Trafalgar Square. Her anxiety remained, especially the worry over the statement. That was still growing. She decided she must get advice from someone. Not her father. The estrangement there had grown. Besides, as a lawyer, he would be profoundly shocked by what she had done. He would simply think her more depraved than ever: definitely delinquent.

John? No, not John. It wouldn't be fair and anyway he was back at Portsmouth. Diana, she decided. Yes, Diana was just the person. She would not feel the slightest embarrassment now in telling Diana everything. In fact, Diana ought to know. Simon had mentioned blackmail in connection with the torn cheque. It opened up an abyss of hidden threat for Diana, as well as for herself. For Diana, particularly, on account of Bill. Poor Bill. She felt old and wise and detached, considering poor Bill and – yes – poor old Diana.

Diana was far from pleased to see Penelope. For one thing it was nearly lunch time. She had planned to eat bread and cheese at home, since Bill was at one of his hospitals. Now she supposed she would have to do something about feeding the girl. It would be the simplest to take her out, but what a bind. And then, Simon had rung up. He would be coming round during the afternoon. That meant she must get rid of Penelope as soon as possible. What a bind. What an infernal nuisance.

Penelope did not expect a very cordial welcome, so she was not surprised to find Diana both cold and preoccupied. She had not seen either of the Allinghams since old Mrs. Allingham had gone home. Before that they had asked her to dinner twice which had surprised her at the time. Perhaps she thought now, as silence fell between them, it had been the old lady who wanted to see her, or to be kind to her, or in some way influence her in her relationship with Simon. Not that she had ever preached to her. How strange that all this had never once occurred to her at the time. How very deep in love she must

have been. Was it always to be like this?

"Well," said Diana, when Penelope had sat looking at her for some time without speaking. "How did you enjoy your trip?"

"France? It was lovely."

Penelope's voice held no enthusiasm, even some small surprise that an event so long past could be expected still to have any importance for her.

Diana looked at her watch.

"I'm afraid I've nothing in the house," she said "We'd better find some lunch out."

"No." Penelope roused herself. "No, Di, I don't want you to give me lunch – or anything. I've come to tell you something. You ought to be warned."

"Warned?"

Penelope told her. About the cleaner's death, that it was murder, that the police were asking questions of all the tenants at the flats, that they had found her cheque in the dead woman's handbag.

"My God!" whispered Diana. A cheque with Simon's name on it, even if it was signed by Penny. A cheque that linked him to the old bitch that did his rooms. He had told her a good deal about Mrs. Morris and her threats. But always as if he had frightened her off.

"If only he wasn't so careless," Penelope said. "He must have torn up my cheque and thrown it away and she found and kept it."

"Why did he tear it up?"

Penelope told her, quite frankly. Diana stared.

"Did Simon tell you why he wanted you to lend him thirty pounds?" she asked, sharply.

"No. Oh, was it to pay that woman blackmail? Did she know … ?" It was Penelope's turn to stare, horrified. The abyss was growing all the time.

"About me? He thinks she guessed. Not that I ever went there. But I agree with you, he's so careless sometimes. So careful and so bloody careless. You never know what he'll do. Why didn't he borrow from *me*? There'd have been none of your – complications."

"How could he? He'd left you, hadn't he?"

"Left me? My poor child, you don't think your silly little affair

with him made any difference to *us*?"

Pity her revenge came too late, Penelope thought, as she smiled into the angry face before her.

"I wouldn't know," she said, quietly. "I expect it would have made a difference to me if I had. But I suppose you're used to sharing."

Before Diana had time to strike again she went on to tell her about the interview with the Chief-inspector and its outcome.

"That's what I came here to tell you," she said. "I told Simon at once, so that he'd use the same explanation."

"When did you see him?"

"I didn't. I don't see him now. It's finished. I thought you realised that." Penelope spoke calmly, quite decisively. She saw disbelief in Diana's face. She could not resist one more thrust at her former more successful rival. "I expect it was the difference in our ages as much as anything. He and I don't belong to the same generation. Ideas about things have changed since he was young."

Diana laughed harshly.

"I don't think you know what you're talking about," she said. "But I'm glad you've got over it. Simon will be glad, too."

"Hasn't he told you, then? I'd have thought from what you say that he would, seeing you are a sort of father – or should I say – mother – confessor."

They stood glaring at each other, both striving to invent more hurtful words to fling. Diana gave it up first. She had never ceased to expect this outcome. Penelope was not the sort of girl to hold more than a passing attraction for Simon. She was not capable of dealing with his difficult, complex nature. Above all, she had not really loved him, or not with the abiding passion that filled her own life.

So now Diana felt forgiving, indulgent. She said, more quietly, "There's no point in our scrapping like a pair of alley cats. I'll remember what you said. I think you should warn anyone else who's likely to get involved."

"Who could be?"

"I don't know. Look, why don't you get John to advise you."

"John! I couldn't possibly ask him …"

"Yes, you ought to. I remember now Simon said John had called and been offensive to him."

"Then he did go! I told him not to."

"What d' you mean?"

"The evening we got back. When I reached our flat he was there with Caroline. I was – rather upset. John shot off though I told him not to. He was mad at Simon for – because – I wouldn't say what had happened."

"Then you *must* see John. If the police find out he was there that evening after you left and that there was a row over *you*, then your story about the cheque will look pretty silly, won't it?"

Penelope nodded. It was what she had feared. They would all be drawn in, unless they could all be warned and hold to the same story.

Diana moved across the room to the telephone.

"Shall I try to get him for you? His aunt ringing up will sound better, won't it?"

She made a face as she said 'aunt' and Penelope, who never could remain angry for long and did not enjoy fighting, particularly with anyone as well equipped for retaliation as Diana, smiled at her and nodded. Their quarrel was over, since the cause of it had vanished.

John Allingham had his own reasons for considering it urgent to see Penelope, more this time on Simon's account than on hers. He listened to her account of the cheque and then said, abruptly, "Was he ever violent when you were with him?"

"Violent? Simon? Of course not."

As he did not answer she said, "Why? Why do you ask that, John? Was he violent with you?"

He told her then of Simon's attack on him and the outcome. She was appalled.

"It's so utterly unlike everything he stands for – or seems to stand for. I simply don't understand – I can't believe …"

"You believe that I'm speaking the truth?"

"I must – as it's you, John."

"Thank you."

They sat, looking at each other, afraid to say what was in both their minds.

"Do you think there's anything wrong with him?" John asked at last. "I mean, when he didn't get up and was obviously not hurt it occurred to me he might be basically – well – a bit

queer."

"You mean mental, don't you? Mad?"

"It isn't always obvious, is it? I mean, it comes on slowly. We had a chap went crackers all of a sudden while I was at Gib. this August. I didn't tell you, did I? Not much in touch, were we?"

She shook her head, sadly.

"I think we ought to tell your father about this," he said. "I'm prepared to back your statement about the cheque. If I'm ever asked, which doesn't seem likely. But, don't you see, the cops are almost certain to ask your father to confirm when he sent you your allowance and so on. We don't want him letting off about Simon. I don't say he's very likely to. But he took it extremely hard, didn't he?" She nodded, sadly.

"I think I'll have a word with him before I go back. Will he be at his club this evening?"

"I expect so."

Before he left her Penelope said, "That evening finished it, John. I simply don't care any longer."

They were standing at the door of Caroline's flat. He said nothing, but taking her in his arms gave her a long and satisfying kiss. Then he was gone, leaving her with a warm sense of comfort and security she had not felt for many months.

Hubert showed a certain amount of embarrassment as he greeted John. But when he understood that his business had less to do with Penelope than with Simon Fawcett he showed more readiness to listen.

"Isn't this rather a public place for what you have to say?" he asked. "I can't guarantee, even if we manage to find a secluded corner or an empty room that we shan't be disturbed."

"Well, perhaps. I've my car outside."

"Then I suggest we adjourn to my house," Hubert said, feeling relieved. "Have you dined?"

"Yes," John answered, with a gleam of malice provoked by the other's stiff attitude and speech. "Penny gave me an excellent meal, thank you."

Hubert made no answer but when he was in his own house he ordered Mrs. Byrne to make coffee and himself got out brandy and glasses, pouring a smallish tot for John and a rather larger one for himself.

"You're driving back tonight, I take it," he said, to explain his

stinginess.

John laughed and agreed that he had every intention of keeping sober. They talked about his present work at H. M.S. *Excellent* until the coffee arrived and Mrs. Byrne left them.

"Now, tell me what you have to say about Fawcett," Hubert prompted him.

John did so, altering the circumstances slightly to make it appear that he had gone to warn Simon of the danger to his position at the college if his affair with Penelope became known there, which was only too likely when the next term began. He did not say that he had warned him about the barrister himself.

"He made light of what I said and I understood from him that it was over. Penny confirms that."

Her father was silent for a long time.

"I can only be thankful," he said, "But I don't pretend to understand the existing code of morals, or lack of it. However, you didn't come here to listen to my grouse against the modern world. Go on with your story."

John skated over the matter of the cheque, giving briefly Penelope's version of it and hurried on to his quarrel with Simon, giving no precise cause for that. But he went into precise detail of the latter's attack on him. "It wasn't only the way he suddenly whipped up the knife and came for me. It was more afterwards. I got the knife away and hit him, fairly hard, but he ducked and took it on the side of his head. Nearly broke my knuckles. He went down and stayed down. That was what foxed me. His pulse was all right. His colour was all right. And his breathing. He had his eyes shut. I'm certain he was not unconscious. I was so certain I just went away."

"Behaving like the coward he is," said Hubert, with contempt.

"No. He isn't a coward. I'll swear he isn't. I don't know what it was. All I know is he lost his temper completely in a matter of seconds. If that cheque found on the cleaner indicates any sort of dirty work on her part …"

"You mean blackmail?" said Hubert, for the first time looking really worried.

"Of course."

"You think Fawcett may have killed her?"

"I want to keep Penny out of it, whatever happens." John said, firmly. "So in case the police come to you, will you stick to

Penny's story of why she gave him a cheque for thirty pounds."

"Yes, I will. But I don't undertake to keep to myself your story of his violence if they ask me what I know of him."

"As long as you don't give them my name. I refuse to be pulled into this thing."

"It wouldn't be evidence unless you corroborated it."

"Then it wouldn't be evidence. What I've just told you was in confidence. To make sure you see how important it is to keep Penny out of it."

"Very well. In any case they may not want to see me at all. I shall not make the first move. I can promise you that."

Chapter Five

Two days later Chief-inspector Mont paid another visit to Mr. Nelson. As before, he found him at home, but this time he was clearly not expecting another interview with the police. He stood in his doorway, surprised and hesitating, until Mont asked if he might have a few words with him. Then, reluctantly, he made way for the other to pass in.

"I'm sorry to bother you again," said Mont, insincerely, "but certain information has come in that makes it imperative."

"Such as?"

Mr. Nelson had stiffened, but he spoke as quietly as ever.

"I won't beat about the bush," Mont told him. "You were dismissed from the Health Service seven years ago for obtaining narcotic drugs for your own use, by falsely representing them to be prescribed for certain of your patients. You were subsequently struck off the medical register for this. You are at the present time a registered addict under your own name, which is …"

"Need you go on?" Nelson asked, wearily. "All that is a very long time ago."

"I'm afraid I must. You work at present as a representative of a firm of manufacturing chemists producing chiefly sedative and narcotic drugs. You have been obtaining supplies of these drugs for your personal use by forging the signatures of doctors purporting to receive samples from you."

"Have you asked every doctor I've visited whether he's taken a sample? Can they possibly remember? All the firms bombard the doctors now-a-days. They sign for a sample to get rid of you. Put it straight in the fire, I wouldn't wonder."

"These were not put in the fire. They were in a drawer in Mrs. Morris's bedroom."

Nelson gave a sharp, despairing cry and flung himself down on a chair with both hands to his face.

"I must ask you what was the nature of this traffic with Mrs. Morris," Mont said, sternly.

Nelson raised a white, haggard face.

“It began when one of the doctors pushed the sample back to me after he’d signed for it. Said he’d changed his mind about trying it. Couldn’t be bothered. But I had his name on the slip in my book. I used the stuff for myself. It gave me ideas.”

Mont nodded. The poor sap got supplies from his own doctor but always with the hope that they could be cut down by degrees to the point of elimination. What a hope! The man was a typical case. You only had to look at his room, his clothes, his untidy, dirty appearance, to confirm it.

“I still don’t see where Mrs. Morris comes in.”

Nelson sighed wearily.

“She found some of the samples. I suppose she made a point of running through all our things in these flats.”

“I shouldn’t wonder.” Mont thought of Mrs. Hyde. An indiscreet letter, probably, in that case. Nelson with his drug-induced carelessness, would be easy meat for the blackmailer.

“She knew what my job is. She knew I didn’t make over much at it. She suggested we might work together. She’d market the stuff if I could bring it in.”

“And you fell for that!”

“Imbecile, I know. I found that out before long.”

“Go on.”

“She never sold the stuff. Or so she told me. But she threatened to tell my firm what I had done.”

“She’d be too scared to get into that racket,” Mont said, “even if she had the contacts. Which I doubt. It wasn’t her line at all. Little family matters were what paid off with her. So she blackmailed you?”

“Yes.”

“How much?”

“I’ve never kept count. Every month or so. It crippled me.”

“Why did you never report her?”

“And let it all come out and lose the only job I’m ever likely to get?”

The bitter despair in his voice touched even Mont’s hardened soul. After all, the chap had begun life as a doctor.

“How much did you give her that Saturday she was murdered?”

“Ten quid. She wanted twenty. I told her that was all she’d get – ever. I meant it at the time.”

“Did you strangle her? Did you take her handbag and post it through the letter-box of an empty house after you’d recovered your money? Is that how you really stopped the blackmail?”

“No!” Nelson was on his feet, panting and terrified. “No, no, no!”

“O.K. If you didn’t kill her there’s no need to get so excited, is there? Don’t leave here, will you, Mr. Nelson? I mean, go out to your job as usual, but don’t leave your domicile for any other. I may want you to help me again.”

When he had gone Nelson stumbled to the telephone and rang a number that was not his own doctor’s. He had to have a shot, and quickly.

At the Yard Sergeant Clay had an encouraging report for the Chief-inspector. Morris had been seen in Great Yarmouth.

“Yarmouth!” Mont exclaimed. “What in hell does he think he’s doing there?”

“It’s where Charlie Pike went to work in a pub after he left the nick in April. Charlie was one of his old-time buddies.”

“So he was. Yarmouth, is it? You’ve been working, young Fred.”

“You told me to find him, sir. After I’d done with that drug enquiry among the doctors. Cor, that was fierce. Like trying to open a rusty lock.”

“They train them to keep their mouths shut. Never mind, it paid off. Mrs. Morris had ten quid in her bag over and above her four quid wages. Blackmail. Nelson.”

“You don’t say.”

“Now, about Morris. Is he doing a job or what?”

“I don’t know. He was seen on the pier there. May have left again. That’s all I’ve got so far.”

Mont went into action and was lucky. Mr. Morris, blustering but frightened was arrested as he was embarking in a trawler about to set off for a fortnight’s deep-sea fishing. He had signed on as a deck hand, to replace a member of the regular crew who had fallen ill at the very last minute before sailing. Morris had always been a man to seize his opportunities, Mont explained to the local superintendent, when he went down to Yarmouth to question the captive.

“Has he ever been a seaman?” the superintendent asked. “If not the skipper’ll be in trouble with the union.”

“Not now we’ve nicked him. The captain of the trawler wouldn’t have known until they were at sea. He’d spin all the right stuff when they took him on.”

“But he wouldn’t have any papers.”

“I thought this was a quayside emergency?”

“You’re right. They were nearly missing their tide.”

“There you are, then.”

Morris had never seen Mont before, but he needed very little prompting to realise the seriousness of his position and the need for frankness.

“We know you handled that bag,” Mont told him. “We know it was empty and that there’d been at least fourteen quid in it. So you took that, didn’t you?”

“She give it me. I swear to God she give it me. I’d not bin out two days …”

“You went home first and there was a row because she didn’t want you in the house. Right?”

“There’s some’ll give anything to please you cops.”

“There was a row, wasn’t there? Look, we needn’t waste time over this. You went off to Bermondsey and told your friends there all about it.”

“All right, guv. There was words. She ’ad a nasty tongue right from the start.”

“She didn’t give you what you wanted – cash. So you waylaid her outside the flats the next morning and took her into the yard where you strangled her and stole her handbag.”

Morris started up out of his chair with a great bellow of rage.

“I never!” he shouted. “You can’t prove it! You’ll never prove it! I don’t deny I let ’ er ’ave it now and then, but do ’ er that way!”

He collapsed on his chair with a sick look on his face.

“I never!” he repeated hoarsely. “Go on, prove it! You can’t!”

“But you took the bag and the money,” persisted Mont.

“What if I did? She stood there as I left cursing and swearing – you should’ve ’ eard ’ er – the language! No wonder the kids got ideas.”

Mont nodded. The man had not been shocked or frightened when he was accused of murder. He had simply been angry. This did not prove his innocence but it certainly did not confirm his guilt.

"You got nothing on me," Morris continued. "My wife's earnings are due to me, aren't they?"

"No."

"I've every right to my split. She was instrumental in shopping me on that last job. She owed me a packet for that if nothing else."

"I see. Perhaps you'd like to explain in more detail exactly what she did to get you shopped?"

"And perhaps I wouldn't."

Morris shut his mouth firmly and sat glowering at his questioner. Mont said, patiently, "You tell me your wife was shouting bad language at you. Did no one in the flats or in the street hear you? Did no one look into the yard to see what was going on? Did no one in the flats look out of a window?"

"You'd better ask them," Morris answered. "I wasn't in a mood to notice."

And the caretaker was away, Mont remembered, which was probably why Mrs. Morris had taken her husband into the yard, knowing their inevitable quarrel would not be overheard.

"Why did you go with her into the yard? In order to rob her? Did you expect a fight?"

"Me go with … You got that one wrong, guv. It was she was there when I went in."

"In the yard?"

"Sure."

"Why did you go into the yard yourself?"

"To ask for 'er at the back door. Where else?"

"But you never got as far as asking?"

"I told *you*. She was there, waiting."

"Waiting for what?"

"Said she expected a visitor. Don't know 'oo. Never asked 'er."

Waiting to meet someone by appointment. Mr. Nelson, for instance? He would know that the caretaker was away, and so, for that matter, would the other tenants, probably. But Morris did not know. It was a point in his favour.

"Do you swear that your wife was alive and well when you left, after robbing her of her handbag?"

"She was. I'll swear to that till I'm blue in the face."

Nothing would shake him. In the end Morris was charged with

the larceny, pleaded guilty in the magistrate's court and was remanded in custody for a week. Mont began another series of interviews at the flats.

This time he wanted to discover which of the inmates could have arranged to see Mrs. Morris on the morning of her death. The result of this was not very helpful. Nelson remained under suspicion, for he was on the premises. Mrs. Hyde could be written off, though her bedroom window on the first floor did overlook the yard. Of the rest only one of the clerks was in at the relevant time.

But was Nelson really likely to have wanted to see Mrs. Morris again that day? He had paid her the wages, he had paid her blackmail. Surely that was enough? Unless he was planning her murder. But surely Mrs. Morris herself would not have been willing to see him again? She might not have suspected him of violent intentions, but she would certainly suspect that he wanted to get his money back. No, it had to be someone else, if Morris was to be believed. Somehow Morris's story had that kind of inconsequence that was so often the truth.

Painstakingly, with Sergeant Clay assisting, Mont went through every statement, every note that had been taken from the beginning of the case. It was the sergeant who found the discrepancy.

"This Mr. Fawcett, sir," he said. "Left the flats at nine-thirty for Victoria. Arrived at his friends' place two-thirty. Fifteen minutes in their car from the station the other end. Train arrived two-fifteen. That train was a fast one, leaving Victoria at one-five. What was he doing between nine-thirty and one-five?"

"Shopping and having lunch, he says," Mont answered.

"He doesn't give any details?"

"No. Except looking at some pictures at the Tate gallery."

"There'd have been time, if he'd gone back to the flats at twelve or even just after …"

"To do Mrs. Morris and catch his train? You're right. All the same, if it was a premeditated murder, a clever chap like Fawcett would never leave such a wide-open hole in his alibi, would he?"

"Perhaps it wasn't premeditated?"

"Then why go back? He had all the morning before him. Why not stop in and see her, if he wanted to, before he left? It doesn't

make sense, either way, really, does it?"

"It was this idea of Morris's she was waiting for someone."

"He's a born liar. Still, I'm inclined to believe him for once."

"Will you have another go at Fawcett, sir?"

"Not directly. He's one of these clever blokes. Very quick in the uptake. I think I'll make a few tactful inquiries at the college."

Wisely, Mont got an interview with the President, himself. It would not do to start rumours in such a place and after all he had nothing against Fawcett, who had not behaved in the least like a guilty man. Not that that meant much with the intelligent criminal.

The President was on his guard at once, anxious at all costs to steer this inquiry away from the college. Mont had to explain rather more than he intended before he could get any information at all.

"I can't see why you come to me," the President complained. "Surely Mr. Fawcett is the right person to give you what you want."

"We are obliged to check statements that are made to us, sir."

"There are lists," said the other, vaguely.

"They don't always tell us the right things," Mont persisted. "I know Mr. Fawcett has been here six years. That should mean the college is entirely satisfied with his work. Am I right?"

"Perfectly right. Though I don't see …"

"Is he well thought of? Well liked and so on?"

"He is very popular indeed," the President said, hoping that his answer to the second question would absolve him from answering the first. He was disappointed.

"Do you and his other colleagues think well of him?"

"His work is admirable. He gets on very well with everyone."

"Has he any particular friend or friends on the staff?"

"I should say, probably no."

"Outside the college?"

"I am not in the habit of studying the private lives of the staff. Or of the students."

The President had not intended to say this, to link the two. He saw at once that Mont took it the wrong way.

"Any particular students?" the Chief-inspector asked, quietly.

"I don't understand you. We are talking about Mr. Fawcett, I

think."

"Look, sir," Mont said, losing patience. "This is a murder inquiry. The dead woman was well known to the police. She had a nose for scandal and how to profit by it, if you take my meaning. Was there ever any episode connected with Mr. Fawcett and the college or anyone who works there that might have come to her knowledge?"

"Certainly not," said the President, in a panic. The Dawson boy, the Dane girl. He had been told of these episodes, as the Inspector would call them, but in neither case as far as he knew had Fawcett transgressed any of the accepted rules. His private life, as he had said to this prying policeman, was his own affair. The President's personal dislike of the man was irrational, he felt, and beside the point.

"Most certainly not," he repeated.

Mont left the college with a firm conviction that the President was lying. There was something not so nice about Simon Fawcett after all and he could not look for enlightenment at his place of work.

But he still had one last source, or rather two. Miss Dane's father and the friend Fawcett had met for his early lunch before catching the train at Victoria.

"It was coffee as far as I was concerned," George Clark told him. "Much too early for my lunch."

"What time would it be, sir?"

"Oh, not much after eleven. He said he'd missed out breakfast because he was packing and anyway didn't want to bother with clearing it away. But he was hungry and his train went at an inconvenient time for lunching at the usual hour."

"The one-five?"

"Was it? I expect he told me. I don't remember."

"Where did you have this – er – meal, sir?"

"Near Victoria. He'd parked his bag there. Had to buy a shirt, he said. Forgotten to put in a clean one. And wanted to see some special collection they're showing at the Tate."

"Did you go with him?"

"No. Pictures aren't in my line."

"What time did you leave him?"

"I can't remember. But he had ample time for his programme."

Ample time, Mont thought, and for variations on it. No good to ask him about the collection at the Tate. He'd know. You couldn't expect them to remember him there. Always queues for these special showings now-a-days. There'd been pickpockets in the queues, so he knew.

"You've been a friend of Mr. Fawcett's for a very long time, I understand?" he asked, trying to find some new approach.

"Years. I taught at the same school, Summermoor grammar. Simon had been there a couple of years before I arrived. I was there three years and left to go into my present job. He left himself a couple of years later to come up to the college here in London. We'd kept in touch. I see a fair amount of him."

"Yes." This all tied up with Fawcett's own account.

"So you are very old friends," Mont said, slowly. "Did you ever go to his home in Beltonston?"

"Beltonston?" George was astonished. "They didn't live *there!* Pontley. Yes, I went to stay weekends sometimes at Pontley vicarage. Not after his mother died. He couldn't bear the sight of the place after that. Then his father gave up the living and went to stay at a guest house on the south coast. I forget where. The old man died soon after his wife. Very sad. Nice old boy."

"Where is Pontley?" asked Mont, cautiously.

"Warwickshire. Small village. About seven miles from Stratford. Shakespeare country."

Shakespeare country. That was what Fawcett had said, describing his home. Warwickshire. Shakespeare's county. He had never looked up Beltonston.

George was staring at the Inspector with a puzzled expression.

"You've got a bit mixed, haven't you?" he said. "Beltonston was where the Sewells lived. Old family friends of the Fawcetts. In Gloucestershire, not far from the Malvern hills. Didn't Simon tell you about them? No, why should he? They were really his parents' friends, not his."

Chapter Six

"Then why did he say it was his home town?" Mont asked Sergeant Clay, when he got back to the Yard and described his latest information. "It was a routine question and Fawcett answered it pat. No hesitation. Routine answer. Why give the wrong one?"

"Didn't want you to know the real one, I suppose."

"But that's childish. He must know I'd check sometime."

He was silent for a few seconds. Then he said, "According to Mr. Clark, the home where he was brought up, in Pontley, was the vicarage, so naturally it hasn't been in his family since his father died. I doubt if we'll find anyone there that knew him or them."

"Why should he want to conceal his real home? Anything to do with getting out of the call-up?"

"Might be that. We'd have to locate his doctor. Probably gave us the wrong name for him, too."

"Do you want me to check, sir?" But Mont only said, again, "Why Beltonston?"

Sergeant Clay had no more suggestions to make and after a pause Mont said, "We'll have to go down there, Fred, and find out."

"How? How find out, I mean?"

"Mr. Clark said there are some people there called Sewell, very old friends of the Fawcetts. Let's hope they aren't all dead, too."

"Mr. Fawcett himself would know that, sir, wouldn't he?"

"I don't propose to ask him; not at this stage, anyhow."

They went down together to Beltonston, a small town in the valley, not far from Tewkesbury. Having paid a courtesy call at the police station and learned from the superintendent there that three families called Sewell lived in the place, they began their inquiries.

The first call was unproductive. The owners of the house were an elderly couple who had retired to Beltonston from Manchester. The second address took them to a newly developed

housing estate, which was obviously wrong, though they made sure of this. The third was the house they wanted.

"Which we might have come to first if the Super had told us what it was like," said Clay.

"Probably doesn't know. He's not been here himself all that long."

It was not a large house, but it was a fair example of mid-victorian middle-class comfort, standing in its own fair-sized garden in the older residential part of the town. It was well-preserved, the gravel sweep before the front door free from weeds, the bushes and shrubs neatly trimmed.

A youngish woman in a flowered overall opened the door and on hearing their inquiry called over her shoulder, "Mrs. Sewell, two gentlemen would like to speak to you." She then retreated into the hall, leaving the door open.

Mrs. Sewell, a little breathless from hurrying downstairs, asked on the doorstep, "What is it you want?"

Chief-inspector Mont, having made sure of her identity, said, "We are police officers, madam. We want to ask you a few questions about some friends of yours."

"Ask me – friends of mine – what an extraordinary thing! How do I know … ?"

She heard a movement behind her and turning saw the flowered overall moving away.

"Come in, please," she said.

She led them into a pleasant room overlooking a lawn that sloped away to a screen of thick bushes, with trees beyond. This part of the garden, like the front, was well-kept, though there were not many flowers to be seen. The room, too, with its polished, old-fashioned furniture and well-chosen ornaments, suggested a firm background of wealth, not great, but sufficient.

"Now," Mrs. Sewell said. "You say you are police officers. Not local, are you?"

"No, madam. From Scotland Yard."

Mont produced his card which Mrs. Sewell took, examined carefully and handed back.

"Which friends of mine are you inquiring about?" she asked.

"A family of the name of Fawcett."

Mrs. Sewell was astonished.

"But they don't live here! Never did."

“I am aware of that. But I understand they are great friends of yours.”

“Were,” she said, sadly. “Mrs. Fawcett and I were at school together as girls. When she married Mr. Fawcett – he was a clergyman, as perhaps you know – she went to live with him at Pontley, where he was vicar.”

“So I understand.”

“Then what do you want to know?”

“They had a son,” said Mont, cautiously.

“Oh, yes, Simon. And a daughter, Muriel. She married and lives in New Zealand. Or did. I never hear from her. She may be dead, too. She was never strong.”

“Mr. Simon Fawcett, though? He lives in London, as of course you know.”

“Why do you say that?” Mrs. Sewell showed signs of irritation. “Neither of the children kept up with me. I have hardly ever had news of Simon; none for years now.”

“Indeed? Has he not been to see you lately, then?”

“He never comes to see me. Never writes to me, either. He did not even answer my letter of condolence when his father died. I saw the notice of that in the newspaper, otherwise I should never have known.”

“And yet he gave me Beltonston as the name of – of a place very familiar to him.”

From the way the conversation was going Mont felt he could hardly disclose Fawcett’s mistake or speak of ‘a second home,’ or ‘a much-frequented spot’. On the other hand his curiosity grew.

Mrs. Sewell, noticing the hard bright look in her visitor’s eyes, grew disturbed.

“Is it Simon you have come here about?” she asked, anxiously. “Is he in any sort of trouble?”

“Would you expect him to be?”

“No. No, of course not. But it is natural to ask that, isn’t it, when the police are concerned with anyone? I think you had better tell me what is behind all this before I agree to answer any more questions.”

Mont hastened to reassure her. He explained that he only wanted to fill in Mr. Fawcett’s background, to confirm what he had been told by Mr. Fawcett himself.

“But why? I think I’m entitled to know why.”

Mont explained very briefly the main facts of the Morris case. All the tenants of the Kilburn flats had been interviewed he said, and their stories about themselves had to be checked.

"I see."

Clearly, Mrs. Sewell was not interested in the Morris case and did not wish to be involved, however remotely with the murder of a cleaner in London.

"As I told you before," she said, "I saw very little of Simon, or indeed of his parents, after he left school."

"When would that be?"

"In the middle of the war. It was difficult for them to come over to see us. No petrol. The trains very uncertain and crowded. Muriel was a V. A. D. and never came. Simon only came once during the war. In the summer holidays after he'd left school. He was expecting to be called up, though he had a place at Oxford, and he was dreading it very much, his mother told me."

"He didn't tell you himself?"

"He was always very reticent. Very shy, as a child, always. In the early days it was not so noticeable because he and Muriel came together and went off to play in the garden while we grown-ups talked. They always came to lunch and went home after tea."

"Was this occasion the last time he visited Beltonston?"

"It certainly was. The last time for any of them. On account of his illness, I think it must have been. I never quite understood it. Only that his mother was too upset to want to talk about it to anyone. Even to me."

This was more like it, Mont thought. To encourage her he said, sympathetically, "Asthma is a particularly trying illness, isn't it? Very chronic."

"So he's told you about it, has he?" Mrs. Sewell seemed relieved. "It was because it happened like that in the war. Stopped him doing any active service. My husband was inclined to think it was all put on, because of what his mother had said about his dread of the army. But I was sure it couldn't have been. He had a very proud nature, he would have disdained showing cowardice. A bit conceited and vain, my husband always said. He was such a beautiful little boy when he was about five. I know it galled him to be put aside for a physical

weakness."

"Yes." All this got him no further, Mont decided. The great friendship between the Sewells and the Fawcetts had not stood up well to strain. But that was immaterial as far as he was concerned.

"Well, thank you very much for all you've told me," he said, preparing to leave. "I hope I haven't taken up too much of your time."

"I'm willing to do anything to help the son of a very dear friend," she answered, She meant it, hoping that the word help had been the right one.

"There is just one more thing," Mont said. "I wonder if you could give me a more precise idea of the actual date in the war – the summer, I think you said – on which you last saw Mr. Fawcett?"

"It must have been the end of July or the beginning of August of 1943," she answered. "Before Bank Holiday, I'm sure. It was in the same week that poor boy's body was found in the river. I remember writing to Mrs. Fawcett about it and saying how fortunate it was *after* they'd been, because the police were dragging the river for a whole day before they found him, caught under the bank. Perhaps you remember it? Rather a famous case at the time."

Mont did not remember it. He was not in the police force then. He was in the army in North Africa. But he took leave politely and went back with Sergeant Clay to Beltonston police station.

"Any luck?" asked the superintendent there.

"Yes and no."

He gave some account of his conversation which certainly revealed no lying on Simon's part though it did give a different aspect to his apparent regard for Beltonston and the Sewells.

"Not been there for donkey's years," he said. "And yet he gave it as his home town. Odd, that. This date, now, 1943. Summer. Did you have a famous case, as Mrs. Sewell called it, of a drowned boy?"

"There are always drowned boys here in the summer. 1943? Before my time. I know who might be able to tell us. Is it important?"

"Might be."

“I’ll get on to old Joe. Retired D. I. Runs one of the locals. Does very well out of it.”

A longish conversation on the telephone sent the superintendent to the station files. He brought the relevant one to show Mont.

“You saying ‘drowned boy’ put me off. ‘Murdered boy’ would have rung a bell.”

Mont looked quickly at Clay, who nodded eagerly.

“Let’s have it,” Mont said.

“Child of twelve or thereabouts. Went to fish in the river from the towpath, on the afternoon of August the second, 1943.”

“She got the year right, then,” Mont said.

“The poor kid never went home that evening and we were notified about nine o’clock that he was missing. His fishing rod – a home-made affair – and a jam jar with water but no fish in it were found on the bank. We searched and dragged and the body was recovered next day. The postmortem showed death was not from drowning but from manual strangulation. No sexual offence committed, so motive unknown.”

“No clues to the murderer’s identity?”

“One. That we still have, according to the file. I’ll have to look that up separately, if you’re interested. We had advice from you people in London, but did the job here. A man’s, or at any rate, adult’s thumb and third finger prints on the lad ‘s jam jar. Mixed up with the boy’s own dabs, of course.”

“But you never found the owner?”

“No. Eventually we took the prints of the whole male population in the town. We chased half a dozen tramps, too, who’d been noticed along the river side.”

“But you did not examine the male visitors to private houses who had come from outside the town that day?”

“That would have been quite a job, wouldn’t it? Finding out if there’d been any and where they’d visited. I suppose it could have been done. It wasn’t. D’you think this chap of yours might come up trumps? That’d be quite something after all these years.”

“Wouldn’t it, just? Not that it’d help my own case materially.”

Sergeant Clay ventured to remark, “Wouldn’t it, sir? It was another manual strangulation.” But the others were staring at each other and paid no attention to him.

"I'd be grateful if you'd check on that print you've got," Mont said, "Make sure it's available and all that."

"It'll be available, here or in London."

"There's only one other thing. I'd like to see the spot on the river where the body was found and the place where the jam jar and tackle were lying. If that's possible."

"Certainly." The superintendent consulted the file once more, then got up.

"There's a diagram of the place. I know where it is. I'll run you along, myself."

The three men drove off together, through the town, over one bridge and back across another.

"Our river winds a lot," said the Superintendent, unnecessarily. "Quicker to keep crossing than go round."

He stopped in a short lane where the water appeared in front of them.

"Not supposed to take cars on to the towpath," he said. "We'll walk the rest."

The river here was leaving the town. On the far bank the backs of some square buildings, looking like small factories, turned blank grimy windows to the stream. On the other, separate houses could be seen through trees and bushes, whose leaves were already beginning to change their green for gold and bronze.

"Here's the place," the superintendent said, stopping. "According to the file the rod was cracked but still in one piece, lying half in the water. The jar was up by the hedge on the other side of the path. These houses belong to …"

"Mrs. Sewell, for one," broke in Sergeant Clay, eagerly. "I recognise the tele aerial on her roof. It's not the same pattern as the rest."

"It's not an unique pattern," said Mont, heavily, annoyed at being forestalled. "What's more to the point is this acacia."

He reached up to a branch that hung over the wooden fence. "I noticed it especially from the window of the room we were in."

He turned to the superintendent.

"This door in the fence. Kept locked, I suppose?" He turned to try it, noting the rusty hinges at the side. "Yes. Locked. But easy enough for a lad of eighteen to climb over. This *is* Mrs. Sewell's

property, isn't it?"

"It's hers, all right. And they never thought of the day visitors. Come to that, I'd not have thought of them, myself. Not in this part of the town."

Chapter Seven

"Looks like he's a nut, then, after all, sir? Doesn't it?" Sergeant Clay asked, on the way back to London.

"You're jumping to conclusions. It's still too early to make up our minds," Mont answered. "The Beltonston case is stone-cold, mummified, dust and ashes, except for that finger-print. The only man who remembers the case personally, from the police point of view, is old Joe, the pub owner. At this stage you can't say anything at all against Fawcett. We haven't a scrap of evidence about his mentality, one way or the other. But whether the Beltonston chaps come up with their finger-print or not, we're for Pontley, as soon as I've made one or two arrangements and looked at anything that's waiting for me."

Chief-inspector Mont was kept in London for the whole of the next day. But on the following one he and Clay set off for Pontley.

As they expected, the present occupant of the vicarage could tell them very little about the Fawcetts.

"The old man retired very shortly after his wife died," the vicar said. "I was a curate in the north of England at the time. I very much wanted to get my family to the country. I happened to know our bishop personally and I was willing to take on two smaller parishes as well as this, where they had been managing with lay readers and occasional visits from the archdeacon."

"Quite," said Mont, firmly. "Had Mr. Fawcett left by the time you got here?"

"No. He stayed on for a month, to introduce me to the parishioners. But his wife's death had been a great shock to him. It broke him. He never recovered."

"So I've been told. Then you really know nothing about the Fawcett family? The younger members, particularly."

"Only that the daughter was married and in New Zealand. The son is a schoolmaster, I believe."

"But you never met him?"

"No. Never. There was some feeling about that in the village, I recollect. You see, Mrs. Fawcett is buried in the churchyard here

and her husband said to me several times before he left that he looked forward to lying beside her there and hoped it would be soon. So it was, poor man, but his son buried him in the town where he died, against his father's expressed wish. So I never met young Mr. Fawcett. I wrote a letter to him, reminding him of his father's intention and offering to make all the arrangements. But he did not answer my letter. Finally I wrote to the owner of the guest house where the old man spent his last months and she wrote back to say the funeral had been carried out at the church Mr. Fawcett had attended while he was with her. As I say, a good many of my older parishioners were very sad and also very indignant. They thought a lot of Mr. Fawcett."

"So there are people living here who knew the family?" Mont asked.

"Oh, several. The one most likely to help you would be Emily – Miss Skinner. She used to cook for them from before the war, I believe. She was too old, even then, for any sort of national service. She stayed on until Mr. Fawcett himself left here. My wife would have liked to keep her, but she insisted upon leaving and really she was too old. She must have been over seventy then, so goodness knows what she is now."

"Not likely to be any help, is she?" Sergeant Clay said, as they left the vicarage to walk to Miss Skinner's cottage. "Over eighty and all that."

"I don't know what you mean by all that. I've known old people in their nineties remember the past as fresh as if it was yesterday. It's often the present that foxes them."

This did not seem to make much sense to Clay, but he walked on in silence.

Miss Skinner lived with her niece, a grey-haired woman in her fifties, who opened the door to the two men. She was reluctant at first to let them speak to her aunt, but a high demanding voice from inside the house made her step back from the front door and allow them to pass her.

Miss Skinner was indeed very old and very bent, but her eyes were bright and quick and she took much less time than her niece to grasp what was wanted of her. Probably because she had known the Fawcett family so well and the other woman, who had not lived in Pontley until after she was widowed, not at all.

“Mr. Fawcett was a saint,” Miss Skinner declared. “She did her best, but she wasn’t a patch on him. Too nervy, by half!”

“Mrs. Fawcett, you mean?”

“Who else? But then she had her trials, in which we all shared, I may say.”

“We – being?”

“What’s that you say?”

“Who were you including in the trials?”

Miss Skinner found this amusing. Her old face split into a wide grin, followed by chuckles and choking and streaming tears, until she had gasped her way back to solemnity.

“I was including the kitchen,” she said. “Me and Joan, that was the girl that came in to clean. Only fourteen, just left school.”

“Can you tell me when this was?”

“It was the time of Mr. Simon’s illness. The vicar wanted him to go away, but she wouldn’t hear of it. He must be nursed at home. She must nurse him. You can see what that meant. A trial for us all, like I said. The girl left because she couldn’t stand it.”

“Couldn’t stand what?”

“Mr. Simon’s ways. Asleep from morning to night some days. And others pacing his room, up and down, up and down. Poor soul. What he suffered. What we all suffered. He’d have done better in hospital. But Mr. Fawcett was a saint and devoted to her. He wouldn’t force her. It’s my belief she’d have gone the same way if he’d insisted.”

Her curious mirth had left her. Perhaps it had only been the excitement of having strangers to visit her. The tears that rolled down her lined face now were sorrowful. She had been part of the life of the vicarage, had shared their woes, had grieved for their distress. To Sergeant Clay, London born and bred, her attitude was incomprehensible. He put her agitation down to her extreme old age.

“You’d better go,” the niece said, speaking severely. “You’re only upsetting her.”

But Mont was determined to finish what promised so well.

“I’ve been given to understand,” he said, “that young Mr. Fawcett suffered from asthma.”

Miss Skinner’s face changed. A look of cunning spread slowly over it; she leaned forward to touch the Chief inspector’s sleeve.

“That’s what was given out,” she said. “And quite right, too. But my own dear mother had the asthma and what I didn’t know of it would go on a penny piece.”

“It was not asthma, then. Was it a nervous breakdown? It sounds like that from your description.”

She shook her head.

“I made a promise and I’ll never break it,” she said, firmly. “I don’t know for why you come to me with your questions and your curiosity. You’d better ask Dr. Marshall, him that was in charge of the case. Or that young fellow that’s his partner now. Not that either of them will tell you.” She peered up triumphantly into Mont’s face. “Doctors don’t tell, do they?”

“Is Dr. Marshall still practising here, then?” he asked. But Miss Skinner had closed her eyes and did not seem to hear him.

He moved away, Clay following. At the door, held open by the niece, he repeated the question.

“Dr. Marshall’s dead,” she said. “She doesn’t know. We thought it might be too much for her – too much of a shock. It’s Dr. Campbell now. She thinks he comes because Dr. Marshall is too busy. Dr. Campbell treats her very well.”

“Would there be anyone else in Pontley who knew the Fawcetts?” Mont asked her.

“I couldn’t say, I’m sure.”

And if she could say, she wouldn’t, he decided. He had got something and it was important. He couldn’t use old Miss Skinner in a witness box, but she had given him a very valuable clue. And Fawcett had given the name of Gordon, not Marshall, as the Pontley doctor. Genuine loss of memory or a deliberate lie? Did Gordon mean anything special to him as Beltonston seemed to do?

On the way back to London he explained all this to Sergeant Clay and on arriving there put his next inquiry into action. He wanted to know what Dr. Marshall had written in the certificate he sent to the Medical Board that had examined Fawcett on call-up and had rejected him. The records must still be in existence somewhere. They should be available. If necessary the Home Office must intervene to make them available. Dr. Marshall was dead. His personal records of past patients who had left the practice and the district were most unlikely to have been kept by his successor. Fawcett’s illness had begun five years before

the National Health Service came into being. No records there. The man himself had said he was hardly ever ill now and was not registered with any London doctor. So the Medical Boards records were the only available proof of Fawcett's asthma or whatever else he was suffering from.

Mont no longer believed in the asthma story. It had no support anywhere. Oxford, for instance. It was difficult to get any account at all of Fawcett in Oxford. His name was there, he had taken a degree. But he seemed to have made no mark on the place and no friends. 'A very quiet gentleman' said the elderly head porter of his college, who alone remembered him clearly.

A very different report had come in dealing with Fawcett's record at Summermoor. He had been a popular and successful teacher and had never been absent from the school for a single day on account of illness. He had given complete satisfaction to the headmaster and governors of the school. He had been liked and respected by the staff generally and had made one particular friend, a Mr. George Clark. It was thought to have been the latter's resignation to take up a different nonteaching post in London that had influenced Mr. Fawcett's own resignation. They had been very sorry to lose him.

"Glowing," said Mont, bitterly. "Positively glowing. Much the same as Clark's opinion. Know what?"

"No, sir," said Sergeant Clay.

"Clark's a sensible chap. Scientist. Feet on the ground. But a bit inexperienced, I'd say. Not much imagination. Doesn't come across the seamy side or doesn't notice it. Get my meaning?"

"He isn't likely to meet Mr. Fawcett at his off moments, in a mood, or whatever Mrs. Sewell meant when she described him as peculiar. Or perhaps Mr. Clark doesn't pay attention to it."

"That's right. Doesn't pay attention. And there's another thing. That so-called asthma seems to have left him altogether. Very unlikely indeed, from what I know of it, if it really was asthma."

"Yes, sir," said Clay, who knew too little of the disease to venture an opinion.

Feeling he could do nothing very positive until he had the Medical Board report the Chief-inspector decided to tackle Mr. Fawcett again about the detail of his behaviour on the morning of Mrs. Morris's death. He found him at home, apparently studying his time-table for the new term at the college, due to

begin in the following week.

Simon welcomed his visitor cordially, not attempting to hide a quiet amusement.

"Back again?" he said, as he drew up a chair to the fire. "I thought you'd captured the murderer. Wasn't it her husband after all?"

"Morris says she was alive when he left her."

"So I read in the papers. He admitted stealing her handbag, didn't he?"

"Yes, he did. He couldn't very well deny it."

"She wouldn't have given it up quietly," Simon told him, with a curious gleam in his eyes. "From what I know of her she'd have run after him screaming blue murder."

He stopped with a jerk, then laughed.

"Blue murder. That was what *she* got, wasn't it? Not the husband."

Mont was repelled by the callous mirth, but Simon's words had reminded him of something Morris had said several times and stuck to, in spite of close questioning.

"She was waiting in the yard to see someone, according to Morris," he said, watching Simon closely. "She told him so. Perhaps she didn't want to pass that up. Perhaps she anticipated getting a larger sum at that interview than she had in the handbag her husband had taken from her."

"It's an ingenious theory," said Simon, with frank admiration "I should never have thought of it. And who do you think she was waiting to see. Me?"

Mont was disconcerted. He said, angrily. "We have to consider all the possibilities. Various tenants in these flats …"

He broke off, collected himself again and took Simon over his movements on that morning. The details and the times corresponded exactly with Fawcett's previous statement and with what Clark had told him.

After a pause he said, "You had your lunch very early that day, didn't you? You'd have had ample time to come back here before catching your train at Victoria."

"Only I happened to be buying a shirt and looking at pictures at the Tate."

"Which cannot be proved."

Simon shrugged. Anyone who was fool and knave enough not

to take his word deserved silent contempt. The Chief-inspector resented the arrogance but had no remedy. He was baffled, but at least he had not been trapped into showing his true hand. He had not mentioned asthma. He had not referred to Pontley "By the way," Simon said, as Mont was leaving. "George – George Clark, I mean, tells me you were a bit mixed up about where my parents lived. Pontley, Inspector, not Beltonston. Pontley, in Warwickshire. I told you. Shakespeare's country."

"You told me Beltonston, sir."

"But that's in Gloucestershire, far from Shakespeare's home. As you should have known."

He wagged a playful finger at Mont, who began to lose his temper for the second time.

"Beltonston was what you said," he insisted. "I'm not all that conversant with literary allusions. Not my line of country. But you certainly said Beltonston."

"That's not possible," Simon rebuked him, gently. "Even though the Sewells were such very close friends there would be no possible reason for my making such a mistake."

Mont did not answer. He had now one very good, very convincing reason for the mistake; the overburdened conscience of a guilty, unbalanced mind. The key word leaping up from the abyss of the sub-conscious. Wasn't that the way the trick-cyclists talked?

He hurried away, and hardened as he was a cold dread took hold of him at the thought. Cold, because he had no proof. Cold and vague, too, because he did not know how his suspect would act. So far in his own interviews with Fawcett he had not been able to detect the slightest hint of a violent temperament. Quite the opposite. An educated, cultivated man, who had his feelings very well under control, who seemed if anything of a frivolous turn of mind. He could not imagine Fawcett tense, frenzied, or in any other mood that could lead to violence.

In his quandary, still possessed by that nagging fear of further crime, Mont went over the whole case again. It was Sergeant Clay who produced the next positive idea.

"I've been thinking about that cheque in Mrs. Morris's bag," he said.

"Well?"

"D'you think she was trying a spot of blackmail on Fawcett

with it? I mean, had an appointment with him to sell it back to him?"

"He wouldn't fall for that. It had no value as blackmail. The girl and Fawcett both say it was to pay for her holiday. It can't be proved it wasn't."

"We know that. But did *he?* Lecturers aren't supposed to seduce the students, are they? He couldn't risk getting in bad with the college authorities. Mrs. Morris might have threatened to expose his rather close friendship with the girl."

Perhaps Clay was right, Mont considered. Perhaps, as blackmail, to one vitally concerned to preserve his post at the college –

"Miss Dane's quite a dish, sir, isn't she?" Clay went on. "I was never all that sold on the holiday payment yarn, myself."

"If you're right, he'd be more likely to come up with the lolly than she would."

"Yes. Fair enough. You'd certainly think so."

"Still, Mrs. Morris was always one to smell out a scandal where one didn't exist. Or didn't seem to exist. Look at Nelson. We'd never have got on to him, without her blackmail."

"Fawcett's information about him led us to find that out."

Mont gestured impatiently.

"You had something to suggest?"

"About that cheque. If Mrs. M. wanted to sell it him. He goes to the yard behind the flats with the money. She hasn't got the cheque."

"I see what you mean." Mont was interested. "He doesn't believe her. Thinks she's double-crossed him. Loses his temper …"

"Goes for her …"

"That's just it," Mont cried, banging his desk with his open hand. "Is that chap ever likely to lose his temper to such an extent?"

"If he's a nut, he is. That's what they do, isn't it? He did it before to that boy at Beltonston, if he's the chap they want down there?"

"We're going round in circles," Mont said, wearily. "I think I'll have a word with the girl's father. Dane won't give anything away about his daughter but he might know something we haven't heard about Fawcett."

Hubert Dane was not at all surprised to have a visit from the Chief-inspector. He meant to turn it to good account if he could. This, with practised skill, he brought off in less than half an hour of careful insinuation, reservation and clearly defined discretion.

"Mind you, I'm not speaking from a personal experience of the man," he said, earnestly. "I haven't often met him and then only in company, when he is at his best. And a very charming best that can be," he said, with a smile that damned the charm utterly. "Besides, he's a friend of some very dear friends of mine. I wouldn't dream of saying anything that might raise suspicion, incredible in the circumstances, against anyone of his – well – acknowledged standing. All the same," He paused effectively. "I can't help remembering a rather frightening experience – You were asking me about violence, weren't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"I didn't have this experience personally, so I'm not going to describe it to you. I can only suggest that you see …"

He stopped, heightening, as he intended, the Chief inspector's curiosity.

"Yes, sir? Who should I see?"

"Lieutenant John Allingham," said Hubert. "He's in the Navy and serving at present in H. M.S. *Excellent* at Portsmouth."

"Thank you, sir,"

"Tell him I have not betrayed his confidence. He is still at liberty to conceal what he knows. You will have to persuade him in your own way, inspector. If you think he can help you."

If John will play, Hubert thought, as he turned from seeing Mont off, they'll have to go after that devil. Only Penny must be kept out of it. She'd learned her lesson, he'd been told, and her punishment was sufficient without this. The Allinghams too. They must be kept right out. There was more danger there than anywhere. Could he trust John to keep Penny out? Of course he could. He might refuse to say anything. That wouldn't matter. It would only help to confirm what he hoped he had planted in the inspector's mind. That Fawcett was a dangerous man and capable of any crime in the calendar.

Chapter Eight

Chief-inspector Mont behaved exactly as Hubert wished. He followed up the latter's obvious hints all the more eagerly for knowing that the evidence he had gathered so far was shaky in the extreme. The Beltonston case was history: it still existed in police files, and the two finger-prints, he had learned, could be produced for comparison. But those finger-prints were blurred and the date of the Fawcetts' visit existed only precariously in the memory of one old woman. Without supporting evidence he could hardly make out a direct case against Fawcett for the long forgotten crime.

On the other hand recent evidence of violent behaviour on the man's part would at least suggest the possibility that he was implicated in the Morris murder. And then … ? Well, then it would be a question of getting hold of Fawcett's fingerprints and breaking him down about his illness.

For Mont had suffered another setback in that direction. The records of the Medical Boards for the Pontley area had been searched and there was nothing whatever in them relating to Simon Fawcett. Or rather there were papers relating to him, the appropriate form with a line drawn through it and the single remark, 'Unfit to attend. Letter attached.' There was no letter. Perhaps it was lost, perhaps destroyed. At any rate Fawcett had never been examined medically on call-up. He had been excused attendance and there was nothing whatever to show why.

Old Miss Skinner had provided an answer, but it had no medical support. It might convince him, but it would be worthless in a court of law. Mrs. Fawcett had been highly successful in protecting her son and concealing his disease, whatever it was. Had she, by doing so, brought about the deaths of an innocent child and a criminal hag? Mont's frustration roused him to unaccustomed fury at the hidden lawlessness, independence, arrogance or whatever else you could call it of the respectable and respected professional class.

Coming to himself, he decided that anger would get him nowhere and he had better find John Allingham in Portsmouth.

This he proceeded to do. The young man was unwilling to talk about Simon Fawcett and quick to realise why the Chief-inspector had come to him.

"I suppose Mr. Dane has been talking?" he said, with annoyance.

"I asked him for any assistance he could give me," said Mont, stiffly. "As I'm asking you, sir."

"Dane has a definite, personal grudge against Fawcett that can't possibly have any bearing on your case."

"That's for me to judge."

"Not in this instance, I think. I know he was ready to go to extraordinary lengths to catch Fawcett out in some behaviour – anything at all – that would ruin him at the college."

"Indeed? Mr. Dane must have a legitimate motive for such an extreme course."

"He's a very prejudiced man, if you call that a legitimate motive."

"I don't quite understand you, sir."

"I'm afraid I can't help that. I just mean that anything Dane may have said to you about Fawcett is likely to be coloured by his prejudice."

"Yes. Well, let me put it another way. Mr. Fawcett normally appears to be a quiet, self-controlled man. Have you ever seen him behave in such a way to present quite a different picture?"

A picture? Oh yes, a picture of Simon, eyes glaring, teeth bared, coming at him with a long knife ready to strike downward into his neck.

John wiped the picture from his mind but Mont had been watching him closely and saw the quick look of tension, followed by angry disgust.

"Cases of gross instability," he said, carefully, "don't even come to court. Unfit to plead," he hinted.

John knew perfectly well what the man meant. Hadn't he already gone over the whole incident himself, again and again, usually coming to the conclusion that was evidently growing in this cop's mind?

But to describe his brief fight with Simon would inevitably lead to the disclosure of its cause. Penny would have to be brought in, the real reason for what he had called Dane's prejudice would be laid bare, the whole of Fawcett's rottenness

linked forever with Penny. That was unthinkable.

"I'm sorry," he said. "If Mr. Dane thought I could help you he was mistaken. I hardly knew Fawcett. I met him for the first time this summer. I believe I've only seen him once since then.

"Would that be at his flat?"

John hesitated. Had one of the other tenants seen him on the stairs. Better not to lie.

"Yes. It was."

"Did you quarrel? Did he offer you violence?"

This was too much. Hubert must have broken his word. It was monstrous of him to let his hatred of Fawcett endanger his own daughter.

"If Mr. Dane has broken his word to me why did you come to me at all?"

"Mr. Dane betrayed no confidence, sir. But I think you have answered my question."

So that was that, Mont thought, as he took an icy farewell of the furious young man. The detail at this stage did not really matter. Fawcett had been violent. That was enough.

"Is it really, sir?" Sergeant Clay asked, when he heard the result of the Portsmouth visit. "I mean to say, if two chaps blow their tops and one goes for the other it doesn't necessarily mean he's bats, does it?"

"Of course not." For a moment the Chief-inspector wondered if he was going up the wall himself. "And that's exactly what would be said in court. All the same, think it gets us a bit further."

Clay still looked very doubtful.

"Where do we go from here, sir?" he asked.

"Back to Kilburn. To get Fawcett's dabs. And ask him bit more about that asthma of his."

Mont's intention, however, could not be carried out immediately. Fresh news arrived from the flats. Mr. Nelson had been found by the caretaker dead in his bed. And pen note addressed to the coroner showed that the man had taken his life deliberately. It also suggested that the police had hounded him to such an extent that there was nothing left for him to do. This report had come direct to the local divisional headquarters from the coroner, who wanted an explanation.

"The answer to that is a guilty conscience," said the divisional

superintendent.

"I wonder," Mont answered. He was upset by the news, but felt innocent of any conduct that could be described as 'hounding'.

"He must have thought you were on his tracks and catching up with him."

"He can't have. I checked on his drug dealings and warned him. He couldn't deny he was being blackmailed by Mrs. Morris. But that was all. He never was an important suspect."

"He will be now. In the Press, and in the eyes of the public. Probably of the coroner, too. You see what he says. Nelson *could* have done it, you know. He could have wanted to get his money back and when he found she hadn't got it, lost his temper and did her in."

Much the same behaviour that Clay had suggested for Fawcett, decided Mont. Possible, perhaps.

"There's no question it was real suicide?" he asked. "No suggestion of foul play? A fake suicide, a forged note, to make him look like a murderer at the end of his tether?"

"No. But I expect you'd like to have a look round yourself. We haven't moved him, yet."

So Mont's next visit to the flats took him to Mr. Nelson's sitting room where Wilson the caretaker, white-faced and angry, was waiting for him.

"I've had about enough of these shocks," Wilson complained. "Don't know what's come over the place. Never had no trouble here in all the years I been here and now this lot. Murder one day and suicide the next."

"It's ten days since the Morris case," Mont said, sharply. "There's no connection between that and this."

"Oh, isn't there? I'd have thought there was a ruddy obvious connection."

Mont demanded a brief account of the finding of the body and Wilson gave it, sullenly. Since Mrs. Morris's death Mrs. Wilson had obliged those of the tenants who asked for her services. She had gone up to Mr. Nelson's door expecting him to open it for her. When there was no answer to her ring and knock she went back to her husband. Wilson took up his key, went in and found the ex-doctor lying in bed and the note on the table beside him. He at once rang up the police.

"Did you make sure he was dead before you left him?"

"I didn't need to. One look was enough."

Mont did not argue the point. He sent Wilson away and organised a routine, methodical examination of the room, including photographs and finger-prints.

It was later, while Nelson's body was being removed, that Mont caught sight of Fawcett standing in his own doorway, watching the proceedings. Welcoming this opportunity of informal talk he went over to him.

"Poor beggar," Simon said, in a troubled voice. "The final failure of a doomed life."

Mont nodded. You could look at it that way, he supposed.

"Did you happen to see him at all yesterday?" he asked.

"Why yes. If you want to know how he seemed, he was just the same as always. Perhaps a bit more shaky. But then he's been so afraid of losing his job – the only job he'd be likely to get – after you'd checked on his past."

"What do you know of his past, Mr. Fawcett?"

"Only what he told me, inspector. In confidence."

Mont began to feel again the distaste, confusion and sense of frustration that had assailed him before in his dealings with this man.

"Did you go into his room at all yesterday?"

"I did. Why?"

Mont saw an added opportunity.

"We shall have to trace any visitors he had, if we can. To find out more of his state of mind. We've taken fingerprints and so on. We shall have to ask Mr. and Mrs. Wilson for theirs. Perhaps you would let us have yours. For elimination purposes."

"Certainly. Though I've never heard of this being done in cases of suicide." Simon lifted calm eyes to meet the Chief-inspector's without hesitation or fear. "Do you think it will help you?" he asked.

"I think it may, sir," Mont answered. "I'll just get my man and come over to your flat."

So the delay and the diversion worked in his favour, he thought, as he and Clay went back to Whitehall. He had his prints. He only had to check them with Beltonston and then he'd know.

"If they tie up, what comes next?" Clay asked. "We still have

no proof he did Mrs. Morris."

"We'd have a strong suspicion he killed the boy. If we know he handled the jam jar the child was using."

"All that time ago!"

"Time doesn't matter to us. It would to him. The shock might break him down. All these years, thinking he'd got away with it."

"Would he really think like that if he's a nut? Wouldn't he have forgotten it, put it away, so to speak? You're pretty sure in your own mind he's our man, aren't you, sir?"

"I'm sure of nothing," said Mont, desperately.

His doubt was shared by Simon, himself. The fingerprint performance had not disturbed him, for he was not aware of its significance. He had worn gloves on the morning he had lunched with George Clark and later travelled by train from Victoria.

But he was disturbed by Nelson's death. The man had left a note. What had he put in it? Was there any reference to himself? Was Nelson another of his enemies; one of the group that was closing round him, nearer and nearer, threatening –

They were powerless, of course. Every attack on him, from the very beginning, had failed. Would always fail.

But it left him feeling restless, tired, worried about trivial things. He decided to go out and walk off his disquiet.

Before leaving his room he looked in his wallet. He had plenty of money left. The thirty pounds he had drawn from the bank to give to Mrs. Morris, which he had not had to give to her, was still there. He had spent none of it. He still had, besides, ten shillings left out of the additional sum he had allowed himself for the next fortnight's expenses. The fortnight was up today. It was another Saturday. Of course, that was why they'd found Nelson this morning. His cleaning day. Mrs. Wilson. Of course. Why had he not realised before that today was another Saturday? And he still had thirty pounds.

He put on his old, stained mackintosh, feeling for his gloves in the pockets as he did so. The flat had become distasteful to him. Nobody had been in to clean it since Mrs. Morris died and though he had all his main meals out he ate his breakfast at home. Consequently the kitchen sink was now filled with dirty cups, saucers and plates, sprinkled over with the coffee grounds

he had emptied there each morning before making a fresh brew. His bedroom, too, was in confusion, the bed unmade, dirty shirts and handkerchiefs on the floor. A parcel of clean linen, its paper split open at one end, lay on a chair. He had taken what he needed from it, but had not attempted to put away the rest.

Simon turned from the squalor of his rooms and went out, locking the door behind him. There was no one on the landing now. The police guard who had stood there all the morning had been withdrawn. Nelson's flat was empty, Simon knew. But though he glanced at its door as he reached the head of the stairs it was not of Nelson that he thought.

On the first landing he passed Mrs. Hyde stooping painfully to plant her empty milk bottle beside her door. He paused to help her and would have passed on with a gentle smile, but she caught his sleeve and said, "More trouble for us all! I don't know what we've done to deserve it!"

"For us all," he echoed, setting himself apart in his own mind.

"Mr. Nelson. Poor man. I always thought there was something odd about him. Retired from business, but out such a lot. Drugs, Wilson says. He may well be right. I wouldn't be surprised if it was Mr. Nelson that killed Mrs. Morris."

"Wouldn't you?"

Simon offered no opinion on this point himself.

"Are you going away again?" Mrs. Hyde went on. "No, I see you aren't. No luggage."

"I shall be back this evening," Simon told her, his thoughts far away. She watched him go down the stairs until he was out of sight. Such an interesting man. Such good manners. So handsome.

Simon got on a bus that took him beyond Edgeware. After that he walked. He had no particular purpose in walking, but he found it soothing to move on and on along a main road, where the houses grew smaller, older, more countrified and finally, late in the afternoon, ceased altogether. Pavements ended, hedgerows took their place. Cars and lorries swept closer to him until he tired of dodging them and turned away down a forgotten lane and at last, as the sky darkened and stars came out and the late harvest moon rose like a huge pumpkin, swollen and golden, over a little tree-covered rise, came to a stile and a footpath beyond.

He found he was thirsty. There seemed to be no house or cottage within sight, only those deserted fields given over to solitude and idleness that mark the edges of any suburban sprawl, and behind him a glow in the sky over the city he had left.

But in one of the fields as he moved slowly along, he saw an abandoned cattle trough, his attention drawn by the glint of the rising moon on the rain water that half filled it. He stooped and drank from his cupped hands. Then looked about him. Having stopped walking at last he discovered that he was very tired. His legs would hardly carry him across that field to the next, where, under an ancient shelter, the remains of a haystack lay in untidy heaps on the bare earth.

He pulled the heaps together, climbed on to them, sank down and lay still. Here was peace at last and freedom from his enemies and a soft bed for his tired limbs. No one here to interrupt his thoughts, no one to disturb him or make demands of him.

As he turned over, snuggling deeper into the hay, his wallet struck against his ribs and he swore and pulled it out, half inclined to throw it from him. But remembering what it was, he clutched it against his chest and lay open-eyed in the darkness. Thirty pounds in it. Thirty saved from that harpy. A bargain's a bargain. Fair's fair. No cheque, no money.

Her abuse rang again through his head, augmented by his own unfettered imagination. Abuse. Greed. What a fuss they were making over her.

He withdrew his thoughts from Mrs. Morris and from that river bank in Beltonston, that kept returning to him of late, the fishing rod and the acacia tree, among whose branches he had sat, composing his poem, until the boy had flung a stone up at him and another and he had leaped down and taken away the jar, emptying the fish on the ground, at which the boy had struck him and he –

And he, Simon Fawcett – you, Simon Fawcett – send them all away – send them away, Simon. That girl, Joan. Did she laugh when you caught her on the landing? Or was it a scream … ? A scream – But you were asleep. Though you walked every day to the bath room you were really asleep, resting.

Ill, Mother said, over and over again. Ill. What nonsense. How

silly old Dr. Marshall was. With his pills that you threw out of the window.

And those others – were there others? Or did he only hear their voices? Enemies. Voices were enemies – He would destroy them. For ever – and ever – destroy –

The moon travelled on and sank again and the sun rose over the field and the shelter, but its rays did not reach the sleeping man inside. About midday on Sunday, Simon woke up, very thirsty and hungry, though he recognised only the former state. He went along to the cattle trough again and drank like an animal, putting his lips to the water to suck it up, noisily.

There was no one to see him. When he had drunk enough and relieved himself in the hedge he went back to his nest of hay, sinking deep into the yielding mass, unconscious of insect bites, of dust, of scratching straws, of the heat of the September sun on the iron roof of the shelter. He slept and woke to a confused march of imagined and remembered scenes and slept again. All of Sunday passed in this way and Sunday night, when a shower of rain clattered on the roof above him like a rattle of tin cans, but could not bring to focus his distorted wandering mind.

On Monday morning he woke up shivering, dizzy from lack of food, but in full knowledge of himself, though not of where he lay.

Chapter Nine

Mrs. Allingham was in London again, this time for only a short visit of a few days. The upheaval at her cottage and the alterations to its plumbing had made her aware of certain other deficiencies, such as the old-fashioned light fittings, the very worn and faded curtains in her little dining room, and so on. She determined to bring such things into line with her modern drainage system.

The end of the school holidays made the visit possible. Diana usually took the children back to their respective schools in the car, which William was willing to sacrifice for the purpose. Both schools were in Somerset and Diana also had friends in that county. This year she proposed to take the children down on Thursday and spend the rest of the weekend with her friends, returning in time for lunch on Monday. Mrs. Allingham arrived on Thursday in time to have lunch with her grandchildren before they left.

By the following Monday morning she had finished her shopping and ordering and looked forward to going back to the cottage on the following day. She could have gone earlier but she felt it her duty to stay until she had seen Diana again.

She was not happy about her daughter-in-law. Diana was thinner, more easily provoked, more restless than she had been in June and July. The holiday she and William had spent at the latter end of August with the children in Brittany did not seem to have done her any good at all.

Mrs. Allingham knew about Penelope's visit to the Arles festival in a college party that included Simon. From this she concluded that the girl was still involved with this dreadful man. She did not know the final outcome. Diana never spoke of Simon. William, when his mother tried to discuss Penny's affair, said he had not seen Fawcett since the evening he had abused his hospitality and added that he did not want to. It was not like William, she thought, to speak in the sort of language Hubert often used. It distressed her, but she could not press him to say more. Since she avoided reading the detail in newspaper

accounts of murders she failed to connect him in any way with the death of Mrs. Morris.

But William, through Hubert, had followed the case with much anxiety. He was horrified to discover the full extent of his friend's hatred. Horrified and deeply resentful. For the first time in many years they quarrelled violently. It was over two weeks now since the murder of Mrs. Morris and nearly two weeks since the arrest of her husband, but he still had not been charged with the crime, merely remanded in custody for theft, according to the newspapers.

The quarrel with Hubert took place when he came to see William to report what he had said to Scotland Yard. Though Hubert seemed to be warning his friend that he had given John's name only as a source of information about Simon, this could not, William thought, have been the real excuse for disclosing his action. William knew, as Hubert intended he should, that the real warning related to Diana. When he understood this, realising at the same time his own helplessness, William lost his temper completely. Hubert was affronted and the quarrel was on. They both said more than they intended or really felt. They parted feeling torn, bereaved, still furious with one another.

On Sunday morning, on the front page of his newspaper, William read about the death by suicide of a Mr. Nelson at an address in Kilburn that he recognised. The paragraph, tactful, discreet, mentioned the fact that the deceased had been a doctor, that he worked as representative for a firm of manufacturing chemists. In a final, deadly sentence, the paper reminded the readers of the Morris murder, still unsolved, that had taken place at this same block of flats just over two weeks before.

William felt a weight lifted from him. If only the newspaper's suggestion could be the right one. If only this man's suicide was a confession. A note beside the body, did it say? A written confession, perhaps. If only – if only –

His first thought was to ring up Hubert and ask him if he knew anything about this latest development. The memory of their recent parting stopped him. He would have to wait.

Mrs. Allingham saw how pale and agitated he was and asked him for the cause. Though he had not meant to tell her anything his resolution broke down at this. Without Hubert, with Diana

away, he could not endure the suspense alone.

Mrs. Allingham was shocked by the story she heard, particularly when it came to Hubert's account of Penelope's cheque.

"You see where it might lead?" William said, speaking more frankly to his mother than he had ever done since his marriage.

"To Diana," she said, without hesitation, though he winced as she went on, "Diana is a law to herself, I'm afraid. You have never influenced her, much as you love her."

"I think I have not loved her enough," he said, sadly. "Or not as she wants to be loved."

Mrs. Allingham said nothing. Open condemnation of Diana would help no one, least of all William. Besides, her puritan soul shrank from a discussion of sexual matters, particularly with her own son.

"If this man Nelson is the murderer, presumably the police will drop any further inquiry," William said. He was grateful to his mother for her forbearance and already began to feel better.

"Do you really think he may be?" she asked. "Would you be in such a state if you really believed that?"

"I'm entitled to keep an open mind," he cried, "I go by proof, not prejudice!"

He left her and went down to his consulting room, where he tried to bury his doubts and fears in work. But Mrs. Allingham, upstairs, willing to agree to Simon's guilt because he fitted wholly her pattern of evil, gave herself to prayer for the safety of her family, their good name and their future.

Monday brought no further news in the papers, only a repetition of Sunday's announcement and the arranged date of the inquest on Mr. Nelson. William finished his morning's consultations and went upstairs into the drawing room where his mother was sitting.

"Diana not back yet?" he asked, trying to hide his disappointment at not finding her already there.

"No, dear."

"No message?"

"No. But I've been out part of the morning."

He went into the kitchen where the daily was preparing the final stages of luncheon.

"No message from Mrs. Allingham? She said she would be

back before one."

"No, sir."

"I've got a hospital clinic at two. We won't wait after a quarter past one."

"Very good, sir."

"She may have had a puncture or something," he said and then annoyed with himself for making these excuses aloud, added carelessly, "Anything can happen in a car."

"Not an accident, I hope," said the daily, without alarm.

"No, no. Very unlikely."

He went back to the drawing room and a few seconds later the door bell rang.

"She must have lost her key," he thought, hurrying to the hall. But it was not Diana outside. It was Hubert.

"You?" William said, astonished to see his friend at such an unlikely hour.

Hubert pushed past him into the drawing room, saying in a low voice as he did so, "We mustn't be overheard. I've something important to tell you."

He was disconcerted to find Mrs. Allingham sitting there, but he greeted her perfunctorily and turned at once to William.

"Fawcett has disappeared," he said, on a note of conclusion.

"What d'you mean? That's he's away from his flat and left no address?"

William was determined not to panic, but his thoughts had been for the last half hour with Diana and his heart began to pound.

"He's away all right. He hasn't been seen since Saturday morning."

"But it's only Monday midday, now."

"He told one of his neighbours when he went out on Saturday that he would be back in the evening. He wasn't. The police are looking for him and …"

"The police!" It was Mrs. Allingham who broke into Hubert's rapid speech.

"That's how you know, isn't it?" William said, with bitter emphasis. "They've been to you again. I wish to God you'd left the man alone. What right had you to interfere? Penny's life is her own."

"She happens to be a minor."

"She's over the age of consent. There's been no question of marriage for you to forbid."

"Damn you, Bill! Will nothing make you see Fawcett in his true colours – a criminal – and now on the run!"

"Stop this, both of you!"

Mrs. Allingham had risen, flushed, trembling, but resolute.

"Hubert, control yourself and tell us exactly what this means?"

"I wish I knew – *exactly*." *He* had lost his furious air and now showed the true state of his feelings, confused, miserable, anxious. "I know Bill won't see it, but everything I have tried to do was aimed at saving Penny and others from this man. I've had proof of his wickedness for some time. William knows what I mean. Now there seems to be proof of crime in the legal sense and the police want our help. I find it's my duty to give it if I can."

"At Penny's expense? Or ours?"

"Penny will not be brought into this if we all know exactly where we stand. The police came to me after seeing her. Thank God her association with Fawcett ended the day they came back from France. He has not seen her since. Caroline Feathers has confirmed that he has not been to their flat since before the holiday. I imagine she has been careful to give them the impression that Penny only knows him though the college as a lecturer in her subject."

"They may or may not believe that. The modern assumption would be different. But if you're reassured about Penny, why come here in this state, frightening us out of our wits?"

Hubert made an impatient gesture. Mrs. Allingham, who had remained standing, moved to the door.

"You mustn't forget your clinic, William," she said, calmly. "I'll tell the girl we're ready for lunch. Will you join us, Hubert?"

"No. No, thank you. I must go. I'm meeting a friend … I'm late already. The police caught me just as I was leaving."

Mrs. Allingham had not waited to hear the end of his excuses. Hubert turned back quickly.

"Where's Di?"'

William moved away to the window. He stood there, gripping the curtain on either side, staring down into the street.

"She took the children back to school and decided to stay in

Somerset over the weekend. The Allardyces have wanted her to go for some time. They asked us both earlier, but Mother was here."

"Why didn't you go now?"

"Mother wanted to come up about some things for the cottage. I said I'd cope. Di's been very nervy lately. I thought it would do her good."

"When's she due back?"

"Now," said William, trying vainly to keep the anguish out of his voice. "She's due – overdue – *now!*"

It was fortunate he did not see his friend's face at this moment; the sudden comprehension, the quick gleam of surprise, of satisfaction, almost of pleasure. The pleasure of knowing that one's suspicions were justified. The voice William heard was quiet, sympathetic.

"Expected her for lunch, did you? Well, it's not very late yet, is it?"

"She's hardly ever later than the time she gives."

"Cars …"

"I know all about cars."

"You don't think – I've never liked to say anything about Di – But Fawcett …"

William swung round, breathing hard.

"You don't need to, now. You know what I'm thinking and I know what you're thinking. You'd better get out!"

They glared at each other, once more enemies, with the image of Simon Fawcett between them. Only now Diana had joined that image.

"I came here," said Hubert, slowly, "'to tell you what was on and to say that I had not given your name – or Di's – when the inspector asked for any friends of Fawcett's I happened to know. But last week they did see John at Portsmouth. So the name of Allingham is not altogether unknown to them."

"Get out!" William repeated. "D'you think all that means anything to me at all?"

Diana's clear voice behind them said, "Well, isn't any one going to say hello?"

The two men swung round, William gave a gasping cry that sounded more like a sob and Hubert stammered a greeting.

"I'm late," Diana went on. "You've got a clinic, haven't you?

Why aren't you eating your lunch, Bill? Is Hubert staying?"

"No. I'm just off."

"What have you two been nattering about? You look like a pair of schoolboys discovered exchanging smut in the loo. Arguing as usual, I suppose. Oh, I know the signs. Bill, you look so *worried!*"

She went up to him and he flung an arm round her and drew her close. "Did you think I wasn't coming back at all? Did you think I'd run away?"

Forgetting Hubert, he bent to kiss her, murmuring hoarsely, "Don't torture me! I can't stand it just now."

She moved a gloved hand up to stroke the back of his head soothingly. It was a purely maternal gesture and Hubert, seeing it, and believing her false, was sickened.

"I can tell you who has run away," he said, harshly. "Simon Fawcett."

Diana, not moving from William, but drawing if anything a little closer, said, "What does he mean, Bill? Run away? Why? Where to?"

"No one knows," William answered. "Only that he seems to have disappeared."

Mrs. Allingham looked in through the open door.

"Lunch is – Oh, there you are, Diana! It isn't like you to be so late. William, if you don't come now, you'll be keeping all those poor patients of yours waiting."

"Yes, hurry up and get started," Diana said, giving him a little push. "I'll follow. Don't wait for me."

William took Hubert by the arm and they went out together.

When Diana was alone she first shut the door, then picked up the telephone receiver and dialled. An indistinct man's voice answered.

"Simon?" she said, softly and then, getting no answer, more loudly, "Simon, is that you?"

"Who?" said the voice.

"Simon? Is that Simon?"

"No," the voice repeated.

"Have I got the wrong number?" She recited it, puzzled, sure she had not made a mistake.

"That is the number here. Who did you want to speak to?"

"Mr. Fawcett. Is he in, please?"

Must be a friend of Simon's, but what a queer way of talking.

"Mr. Fawcett is not in. Who is speaking?"

At once she was on her guard. They had never slipped up yet, she and Simon. She was not going to begin now.

"Perhaps you would tell me who you are?" she said. "And when you expect Mr. Fawcett back?"

"I am a police officer," the voice said, "and I must ask you to give me your name and address."

Diana put down the receiver very quietly and stood staring at the instrument. Oh, God, she thought, what has he done? Where is he now and what has he done?

Chapter Ten

Diana lay on the sofa in her drawing room, with her eyes closed, exhausted by the strain of keeping up trivial conversation during lunch. Mrs. Allingham had been more than customarily tiresome: abstracted, solemn, unresponsive to the mildest of jokes. William, on the other hand, had been almost frighteningly cheerful and even frivolous. He had capped her little stories of amusing episodes at the Allardyces over the weekend with absurd tales of his own, mostly medical and not all funny. It was quite obvious to her that both he and his mother were suffering from a reaction to previous anxiety. It was also perfectly clear that the anxiety had been on her account. They had thought because she was half an hour late that she was not coming back. It was as bad as that. They had thought she had run off with Simon.

Simon. Released from the others, alone in her quiet drawing room, Diana let her thoughts run wild. Since his break with Penelope he had come back to her, as she had always known, in spite of her jealousy, that he would do. Not that he had ever quite neglected her. But she had resented shared favours, and had not tried to conceal this from him. Now he was more completely hers, she told herself, than he had ever been. But he had disappeared and all the small hints he had given her from time to time about his poverty, his cheap digs, his horrid neighbours, the dreadful charwoman with the old lag of a husband, all this floated back into her mind, with behind it the charwoman's murder and the police in Simon's flat.

The obvious conclusion was both possible and incredible, terrifying and absurd. Behind her closed eyelids in the darkened chamber of her imagination her thoughts whirled, lurid, beautiful, episodes of horror, scenes of bliss.

"Asleep, my darling?"

Simon's voice at her ear brought her upright on the couch, staring, gasping, almost ready to faint with shock. He was looking down at her with his ready smile lighting the haggard lines of his face, whose tan had turned a sickly yellow and

which was streaked with grey dust from his wanderings.

Diana recovered herself quickly.

"Where on earth have you *been*?" she asked him in a frantic whisper. "What have you been *doing?*"

He took her hands to pull her to her feet and into his arms. His kiss was reassuring but his condition frightened her.

"Where have you been?" she repeated, still in a whisper. "Your clothes – straw – dirt – you smell awful! Why didn't you go home first for a bath and change?"

She said this, unthinking, and then remembered the police voice and clutched his arms.

"You couldn't go back there, could you?" she said. "You know they're there. Oh darling, my darling, what have you done? If it's money, I can lend …"

"It isn't money," said Simon. He pulled her close again. "I came to you because I want you – I need you."

It was the first time he had ever said that his dealings with her had been more than a benefit conferred, not received. She was deeply touched and as usual filled with desire by his presence.

"The girl's gone," she said. "But Mrs. Allingham is here again. I've been away since Thursday. I don't think we can possibly …"

"Where is she?"

"At the moment in her bedroom, lying down, I expect, with the Times."

"Then I will lie down in here – with you."

They both laughed and went on giggling together as they undressed. He took her more roughly than ever before: there was more pain than pleasure for her in the act. It was over very quickly. Neither looking at the other, conscious of failure, they dressed again quickly. Diana was only just ready when the door bell rang.

Cold fear struck at her. She turned to Simon, who was standing strangely quiet by the wall near the door.

"You must go!" she said. "Go into the study while I let them in and then go down while I keep them in here."

"Them?" he asked. "Who do you mean?" Then he took a step forward. "You knew I couldn't go home! How did you know?"

"I rang up." Her mouth had gone dry: she was terrified. "When Bill and Hubert said you'd disappeared, I rang up, and the man who answered said he was – the police."

“You rang up! Stupid, greedy as ever, thoughtless!”

The bell rang again.

“Go, go!” Diana urged, “I must answer it. You know I must.”

He followed her out of the room and went into the study, shutting the door behind him. Diana opened the front door and found Penelope and John outside.

Without a word all three moved into the drawing room.

“Has he been here?” John asked, quickly, as soon as the door was closed. He spoke in a low urgent voice, looking about him.

“He has been and has now gone,” Diana answered, exulting inwardly.

Penelope covered her face with her hands. John said, “You will have to tell the police that when they come.”

Diana looked at them both coldly. She had recovered herself and was now prepared to fight.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I think you do,” he answered.

Penelope, struggling to speak calmly, said, “Inspector Mont rang me up just now at the shop where I work. He asked me if I had tried to ring Simon at his flat. I said I hadn’t. A little later John turned up at the shop.”

“This man Mont is in charge of the Morris case. He asked me some questions a few days ago. Friday, I think it was. Yes, Friday. He got my name from Hubert.”

“Damn Hubert!” said Diana, furiously. Hubert had always made things difficult for her, with his suspicions and his prejudices. “Damn him!”

“They’re asking round, you see,” John went on, ignoring her outburst. “They were on to me yesterday again. That’s why I’m here now. If they’ve contacted Hubert he’ll most likely have given your name, yours and William’s.”

“Simon has masses of other friends he may have spent the weekend with,” Diana said, knowing well from the state he was in that he had not done so.

“When was he here?” John insisted. “Don’t you see the only way for you to keep out of it is to tell the truth about Simon’s whereabouts? Make it appear you’re a friend, but no more than a friend.”

So Penny had told John, the miserable little bitch.

“I can do without your insults,” she told John, glaring at the

girl as she did so, “and Penny’s squalid imagination, too. I’ll tell the police nothing – nothing at all.”

“Bravo!” said Simon, from the doorway. Swift and silent-footed, as usual, he was inside the room before the three had realised his presence.

“If they come here,” he said, “I’ll talk to them myself. I’ve nothing to hide. I rid the world of an evil pest, as I meant to do. As I was sent to do.”

He lifted his head, listening to applause and approval unheard by the other three.

They shrank away from his changed demeanour and voice. He appeared to them now as he had appeared to Mrs. Morris, remote, but compelling, exalted by his vision of personal greatness and personal power. John had already accepted this condition. Penelope, who had listened with horror to John’s description of Simon’s attack upon him, was prepared for these clear signs of madness. But Diana, whose passion blinded her to every abnormality, was simply frightened by her lover’s recklessness and angry with him because he frightened her.

“I told you to go!” she cried, moving forward again and catching at his arm to lead him to the door. “Why are you still here? It’s madness!”

A strange look of cunning came into Simon’s dark eyes, replacing the haughty stare with which he had confronted them when he entered the room. He shook off Diana’s propelling hand, giving her a smile so cold and so full of secret malice that even she was shaken and recoiled from him again. At that moment William came into the room, followed by Hubert.

When he saw Simon, Hubert said, “Ah!” on a lingering note of satisfaction, but William’s eyes and thoughts were for Diana only.

“Thank God!” he said, and turning to John repeated, “Thank God you were here, John.”

Diana drew herself up.

“I don’t know what you mean,” she said, on a high note of anger. “Why aren’t you at the hospital?”

“Mrs. Stone phoned me there. She had seen Simon coming into the house.”

“Why should she do that? Of all the damned impertinence …”

“You don’t understand.”

He glanced at Simon, who was standing perfectly still, looking at Hubert. The latter had gone to the telephone and was there with the receiver at his ear, having dialled Scotland Yard. Hubert nodded to John, who moved quietly to the door. William drew close to his wife and speaking in a low voice, continued, "Listen, Di. The Yard tried to ring me here, downstairs, so Mrs. Stone took the call. She told them where they could find me. I spoke to them from the hospital. They thought he might come here. I agreed that he was a friend of ours. I warned Mrs. Stone to look out for him, which she did. She couldn't get me at once. The hospital lines were engaged. When she did I collected Hubert and came."

Thank God the hospital lines were blocked, Diana thought. She looked about her, desperately. What could they do? What could anyone do? She was aware of Hubert, saying, "Yes. As soon as possible, please, Inspector." She cried, "No! No!" and held out both hands to Simon. "Go quickly!" she cried. "Go *now!* Oh, why do you stand there? Why don't you go? Are you mad?"

It was the second time she had used the word. Simon frowned when he heard it, but he saw the outstretched supplicating hands and could not refuse their appeal. He went to her and took them in both of his, beginning to draw her towards the door.

"We will go together," he said, gently. "Away from the wolves – the jackals – the pursuers – They cannot harm us. We will go together and never see them again."

Hubert joined John in front of the door.

"You're not leaving this room, Fawcett," he said, harshly. "You killed that poor woman, Mrs. Morris, and you'll answer for that if we have to use force to keep you here till the police come for you. You killed her and you know it."

Simon nodded gravely.

"I killed her, yes. I meant to kill her. I rid the world of an evil pest. Now stand aside and let us pass!"

Diana wrenched her hands away. His confession and the way he had made it shook her faith in him at last, toppled her belief in his goodness, his greatness, which had always cancelled out, for her, his ultimate egotism. She struggled to blot out the revelation of his true condition, to struggle back from the abyss into which she was reeling.

“We can’t go,” she stammered. “Don’t you see, you must stay and face them. Prove that you didn’t do it! Swear you didn’t really do it!”

“Come,” Simon urged. “Come. I’ll take you away as you have always wanted me to do.”

“Never! I’ve never wanted that!”

Her world was tottering, but she knew that what she had just said was the truth.

“William will divorce you. I’ll take you away and marry you.”

“No!” she shouted, more appalled by his public avowal, his disregard of his own predicament, his apparent wish to drag her into his own ruin, than by his calm acceptance of his crime. “No, no! I would never have asked for a divorce. I would never have married you!”

She spoke from her heart in absolute sincerity and her stunned audience knew it was the truth. Simon knew it too. She was one of them – the enemy – the false friends – the pursuers. He sprang at her, his strong hands closed round her throat.

In a second the room was in an uproar. The three men who had watched the scene between those two in amazement, in horror, woke instantly from their stupefaction to rescue Diana and overpower the murderer. His grip was so strong that she was barely conscious when released. William carried her to the sofa and laid her on it; then knelt beside her in an agony of fear and compassion.

Meanwhile Simon fought on, but not for long. The combined efforts of Hubert and John secured him at last. He lay on the floor, eyes closed, limp, motionless.

“It’s what he did before,” John panted, kneeling beside the prostrate form.

“We’d better tie him up before he comes round,” Hubert said, getting to his feet.

“No, you won’t!”

Penelope was on her knees beside Simon, loosening his tie, feeling for his pulse. “He’s ill. He’s terribly ill!”

Mrs. Allingham, roused from her rest by the commotion, appeared in the room at this moment. She asked no questions, but after standing for a few seconds, seemed to understand what had happened and moved quickly to the sofa.

Diana stirred, opened her eyes and saw William’s stricken face

near her own.

"My darling," he said, brokenly. "My poor darling."

She gave a little choking sob and turning from him buried her face in the cushion beside her.

Mrs. Allingham said quickly, "Penny, fetch some water and glasses."

William got to his feet. Diana rejected him now, but she would never leave him. His torn heart, his deep humiliation, did not count beside that one grain of doubtful consolation.

He put John aside and knelt and examined Simon. Hubert repeated his brutal advice. William said roughly, "Quite unnecessary. He'll probably stay like this for a bit. If he doesn't, I'll give him a shot."

He went to the house phone first to tell Mrs. Stone to bring him up a prepared syringe of morphine. Then he called in turn a hospital, the local Mental Health officer and finally a psychiatric colleague.

"Paranoid schiz.," he said to the latter. "Tell you more when you get here. It's very urgent. Hurry."

"What are you doing?" Hubert said, angrily. "The cops will be here any minute now. If he's really mad they'll cope."

"If? It couldn't be a more obvious case, poor devil. Don't tell me you aren't convinced, *yet*?"

"Probably shamming," Hubert answered. "Shown cunning all along the line."

The bell rang. John went out to answer it. Hubert, expecting Chief-inspector Mont, followed. But it was only Mrs. Stone with the injection.

She brought it to William, who told her to bring up immediately the various people he had organised for Simon's relief. Then she took the lift down again.

In the drawing room Simon sat upright, looked about him and began to murmur to himself. Penelope bent over him, offering a glass of water. Pity had removed her fear.

Without looking at her Simon took the glass and drank. Then he got slowly to his feet, still murmuring to himself and walking across the room to the upright chair at Diana's writing desk, sat down on it. His voice rose a little, so that those in the room could hear him.

"Don't speak to them, Simon," the voice said. "You are above

their wicked acts. Don't listen to them. They cannot harm you, Simon. Your enemies will die. Don't speak."

"God have mercy on us all," prayed Mrs. Allingham aloud. "Protect us, oh Lord, from this present evil and deliver us from the power of evil at all times, for the sake of Thy Son our Saviour and Redeemer."

Hubert, at the window, exclaimed, "At last. Wonder what held them up," and marched to the door.

"This is my house," said William, "and I say who comes in and who does not. I've told Mrs. Stone to put the police in my consulting room where I'll speak to them when my patient is in the ambulance."

"Has everyone in this house gone crazy?" Hubert thundered, but nobody took any notice of him.

William went up to Simon and spoke to him, gently.

"You're ill, Simon," he said. "I'm going to send you into hospital as soon as another doctor has seen you. Can you hear me? Do you know what I'm saying?"

Diana raised herself. She looked dazed and sick, but she took the glass that Mrs. Allingham offered her and drank.

"Come and lie down in your own room, my dear," the old woman said. "You are not fit to bear any more."

But Diana only said, "Leave me alone," and sat forward, staring at Simon, trying to discover in the ravaged face across the room any last trace of the lover she had adored.

For several seconds William stood beside the still figure, waiting for an answer. Then he moved away.

"Perhaps you'd go down, Hubert," he said. "Tell the Inspector what the position is. Tell him he must wait in the interests of the patient."

"The interests of a murderer! What about the interests of *justice!*"

"Oh, for Christ's sake …" William was exasperated.

"Shall I go?" John offered. "I've seen him in this state before."

Simon got to his feet in one smooth movement.

"You're all talking about me – discussing me as if I no longer existed. I've heard it before. Dr. Marshall – that was his name, tell Mont, not Gordon – He talked like that the other time. The other hell – Months and months – Never again!"

His voice was rising all the time. William darted to the table

where he had laid the syringe holding the injection and began to unscrew the cap of its container. Hubert near the door turned with his back to it. John sprang to join him.

"What did I tell you?" Hubert cried. "You wouldn't be warned!"

Simon laughed. He snatched Diana up from the sofa and dragged her to the window, holding her in one arm while he flung up the lower pane with the other.

"We're going, my love!" he shouted. "Whether you like it or not we're going together and to hell with them all!"

Diana screamed. John and Penelope started forward. But William was quicker than either. He dropped the syringe, sprang forward and pulled Diana away as Simon flung himself forward. John grasped at the clutching hands as their grip on Diana loosened and was himself dragged half out of the window. But Simon, giving a last convulsive effort, freed himself and with an exultant shout fell to the pavement sixty feet below.

Chapter Eleven

There was nothing that any of them could do. They were appalled, stunned, helpless: Hubert most of all, in the blinding revelation of where his pursuit had led. It was William who moved first. Laying the now fainting Diana on the sofa, with a brief direction to his mother, he dashed down the stairs.

The instant hubbub in the street when Simon fell had come at once to the ears of Mrs. Stone, who had hurried to tell the police officers waiting in William's consulting room at the back of the house. So when he arrived in the hall he found the front door open and a crowd on his doorstep, through which he had to force his way. By the time he got to the centre of interest, to Chief-inspector Mont and Sergeant Clay kneeling by Simon's shattered body, an ambulance had drawn up and a private car was coming in to the kerb a few yards behind it.

The ambulance men helped Clay to force back the crowd. The men had been told the nature of the case they had been sent to convey to a mental hospital, so they were not altogether surprised at the outcome. The doctors seemed to have slipped up: not for the first time in such cases. They were always shy of certifying on account of the danger of legal retaliation later if the patient recovered. Tricky business, these mental cases, whichever way you looked at it.

The Mental Health officer who had arrived in the car was admitted to the circle round the dead man. He too, took in the situation at a glance and asked at once for Dr. Allingham.

"I am Dr. Allingham," said William. "I sent for you, but as you see there is nothing now to be done."

Mont looked up. He had identified Simon by his wallet, which had fallen from him as he hurtled down, together with other small objects, coins and a pen, a pocket comb, a diary. Mont had noticed too, the six five-pound notes, the thirty pounds of untouched currency. The money was sufficient proof to him of Simon's guilt. There would now be no need to prove it in a court of law. Only to convince them at the Yard and sort out the details of the suicide.

"I'd like to speak to you directly, sir," he said to William.

"Of course."

The ambulance men brought their stretcher, covered Simon, took him away to the mortuary. Mont went back into the house with Clay, William and the Mental Health officer. The crowd lingered, looking alternately upward at the now closed top window of the house and downward at the blood stains on the pavement.

Above in the Allinghams' drawing room the stricken silence continued. Only now Penelope had drawn close to John and he had an arm about her, and Diana, having recovered from her faint, was sitting up in a corner of the sofa, her head resting against the back of it, her eyes closed, her face white and unmoving. Mrs. Allingham knelt beside her, her lips moving in fervent, terrified prayer. Only Hubert, though he did not speak, moved restlessly about the room, often going abruptly to the window and leaving it again as abruptly.

When William came back into the room they all, except Diana, exclaimed aloud and moved towards him.

He said, quickly, "There was nothing to be done for him, as you must all have realised."

John said, "He's dead, then?"

"Yes."

Diana gave a little moan, swaying her head from side to side. William went up to her.

"It must have been instantaneous, my darling. He can't have suffered at all. In his state of mind at the time, I doubt if he appreciated what he was doing or what would happen to him."

Diana opened her eyes. Behind the despairing grief there was a gleam of contempt.

"I was close to him before you pulled me away. I saw the look in his eyes. I shall never stop seeing it, God help me – never! He knew everything. What he had done and what he was going to do."

She flung out her hands.

"You should have let me go with him! You should have let me die, too! How am I to live with that memory?"

"I ought to have given him a shot when he collapsed. At once," William said, hoarsely. "It was my fault from the beginning. I wouldn't let myself make the obvious diagnosis. A

mild schizophrenic, I often thought. Unimportant. God forgive me, I wanted him always to be unimportant."

He turned away, shaken by his failure as a doctor, by his failure as a husband, by his refusal to accept reality.

"That's beside the point," Hubert told him. "Your only responsibility was in not letting the police up here when they arrived. You bear a heavy responsibility for that."

"Are you disappointed because you didn't see him arrested?" Penelope cried, in a fury of sorrow and disgust. "Are you feeling baulked of the handcuffs and the publicity and the disgrace? Baulked of your revolting revenge?"

Hubert put a hand up to his eyes. He was no sadist. His cruelty came from a blunt vision, a rigid code and great legal integrity. His daughter's contempt hurt him bitterly, confused as he was by the shock of Simon's death.

"The man was a murderer," was all he could find to say.

"He was a child," Penelope sobbed, remembering her lover's charm, his wit, his delight in easy pleasures. She turned to John for comfort. "A poor lost child!"

"I ought to have seen it earlier," John murmured over her bowed head, holding her close. "But he seemed so normal most of the time."

He grieved for Penny's grief, but knew that Simon's death had brought him her truer love.

"It was God's will," Mrs. Allingham said, in a shaky voice. "He was an embodiment of evil and he did evil. He has destroyed himself as evil is meant to be destroyed."

"If I were your God," said John, outraged by this, "I would call that blasphemy!"

Diana spoke, slowly and with difficulty.

"You are all making excuses. For yourselves. I make no excuses. I am the only one who loved him, truly loved him. And I am guilty, too. But I make no excuse. I loved him."

A call came through on the house telephone. Chief-inspector Mont and the Mental Health officer would like to say a few words to them all.

Mrs. Stone, pale, shaken, but competent as ever, brought the two men to the flat and left again discreetly. It occurred to William for the first time to wonder what she had thought of Simon, how much she had guessed of his place in the lives of

those assembled. He would never know. Mont, grave-faced and upright, looking as solemn as if he were in church, would have learned nothing from her, either. This was entirely obvious when the Chief-inspector began to speak.

"I thought it might be helpful to you all if I told you, at this stage, as much as I can about the – er – deceased," he began.

He glanced round his audience, so quiet, so self-contained. The one on the sofa, who seemed to have suffered the most shock, would be Mrs. Allingham. The old lady perhaps her mother or his.

"I discovered certain things in the course of my investigations into the murder of Mrs. Morris that led me to conclude that Mr. Fawcett was responsible. But also that his act was due to mental unbalance. This is confirmed by Dr. Allingham's diagnosis, made here this afternoon, when Fawcett finally broke down and showed that he was indeed insane."

He paused. The faces turned towards him gave him no help. These people, he thought bitterly, would never have helped him. They were strong in their quick intelligence, their habit of individual thought, their tradition of command, their unassailable self-confidence. He could see that they were suffering, but in front of strangers, such as himself, they were in control of that, too. Their facade was perfect, unbreakable.

"Mr. Fawcett," he went on quietly and deliberately, "suffered from schizophrenia from the age of eighteen. He had always been a shy, withdrawn child. At eighteen he killed a little boy of twelve in his first paranoiac attack."

That shocked them. There were cries from the women, gasps from the men, stammered questions, denials. He had broken through, temporarily at any rate.

"There is absolute proof of it," he told them and gave them the evidence he had discovered. "Following that incident, which no one suspected at the time, he was acutely ill for a number of years, his true condition being most unwisely kept secret by his parents. Or as secret as possible. I think the village where they lived knew pretty well what was the matter, but they loved and respected his father, the vicar. As Dr. Allingham has told me, the disease may become quiescent for years, perhaps for the whole life-time. This was so in Mr. Fawcett's case, for many years. I have no absolute proof of his motive for killing Mrs. Morris, but

motive is hard to pin down in the case of the insane. It need not be adequate from a common sense point of view."

He paused again. The thirty pounds in Fawcett's wallet had convinced him that attempted blackmail by Mrs. Morris was the motive, the missing cheque the object to be bought. Its absence had triggered off the violence. But he had no absolute proof here and thanked his stars he need never find it.

"In any case," he went on, "Dr. Allingham tells me he confessed to the murder. Taken with the clear diagnosis and in the absence of other suspects …"

"There was a Mr. Nelson …" began Diana, coldly. But she stopped, seeing how pointless was any argument, how fruitless, now that Simon was dead.

"The weight of evidence points to Mr. Fawcett, madam," said Mont, politely. "I am quite satisfied and I am sure my superiors will be, too."

"There will be an inquest, of course," said Hubert. "How much of what you have told us will come out, then?"

"It depends on the coroner, sir," answered Mont. "The earlier murder case is closed. I don't think it need be mentioned. There is sufficient evidence of the onset of the disease without that. Schizophrenia being fully established, the rest follows."

"You will want some of us to give evidence at the inquest, won't you?" Hubert asked.

"Just Dr. Allingham, I should think sir. But the coroner …"

"Jardine," said Hubert to William. "I'll have a word with him." The latter nodded.

"There's just one thing more I think you'd all like to know," Mont said, anxious to end this uncomfortable interview. "I got in touch on the phone downstairs with a Mr. George Clark, a friend of the deceased. He was a close friend – in fact, as far as I know, the only intimate friend Mr. Fawcett had. Mr. Clark was naturally most upset, but he agreed at once to act in the matter, arrange burial, get in touch with the college, any relatives that can be found, wind up affairs and so on. I'm telling you this because you might feel in some way responsible, seeing that – well, that it happened here. And being, to some extent, acquainted with Mr. Fawcett."

"Thank you," William said, when no one else spoke.

A silence followed. None dared to look at another. They had

each been exposed to all the rest, naked in their several inadequacies, their collective blindness. It was a sore punishment and also an enormous relief, to find that Simon had a loving friend who had done him no wrong and would bring him back in death to the world of sane men and decent disposal.

Penelope and Mrs. Allingham wept openly in shame and sorrow. Diana covered her face, her hurt as yet too deep for tears. The men stared before them with stern faces, longing for this painful scene to end but not knowing how to end it.

Chief-inspector Mont said awkwardly to William, “I’ll be going now, sir,” and turned to the door, looking round for the Mental Health officer to follow him.

But the latter knew more than Mont of the havoc that had been wrought in the minds and lives of those in the room. He had experienced these occasions before. He knew the long struggle of the collapsing mind, he knew the terrible effect it had on those in contact with it.

“You mustn’t blame yourselves,” he said, earnestly. “Think what it’d have meant for him if he’d been taken to hospital with the charge of murder pending. Lifelong imprisonment in a mental institution. It couldn’t have been overlooked, could it? I mean to say, not with the earlier incident, it couldn’t. That made it multiple murder, you see. So it really is for the best the poor soul did what he did. I’m sure you’ll come to see that in the end and not blame yourselves, any of you. You’ll excuse me speaking out, I’m sure. I’ve had a lot of experience, believe me. And I know none of you folk were to blame. You did your best. I’m sure of that.”

This time not only William murmured, “Thank you.” Penelope whispered it and Mrs. Allingham added, “God bless you.” Only Diana remained frozen, motionless, with her hands still covering her face.

But when William had taken the two men down and had come back to the silent room those last comforting words had begun to take effect. The women dried their eyes and sighed and began to look about them. The men moved together, waiting for William to suggest a restoring drink. “You did your best, I’m sure,” the man had said. Perhaps the coroner would say the same.

Complacence, flooding in gently, soothingly began to wash

away the agonising guilt.

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